Thomas M. Disch THE BRAVE LITTLE TOASTER

# The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction

AUGUST

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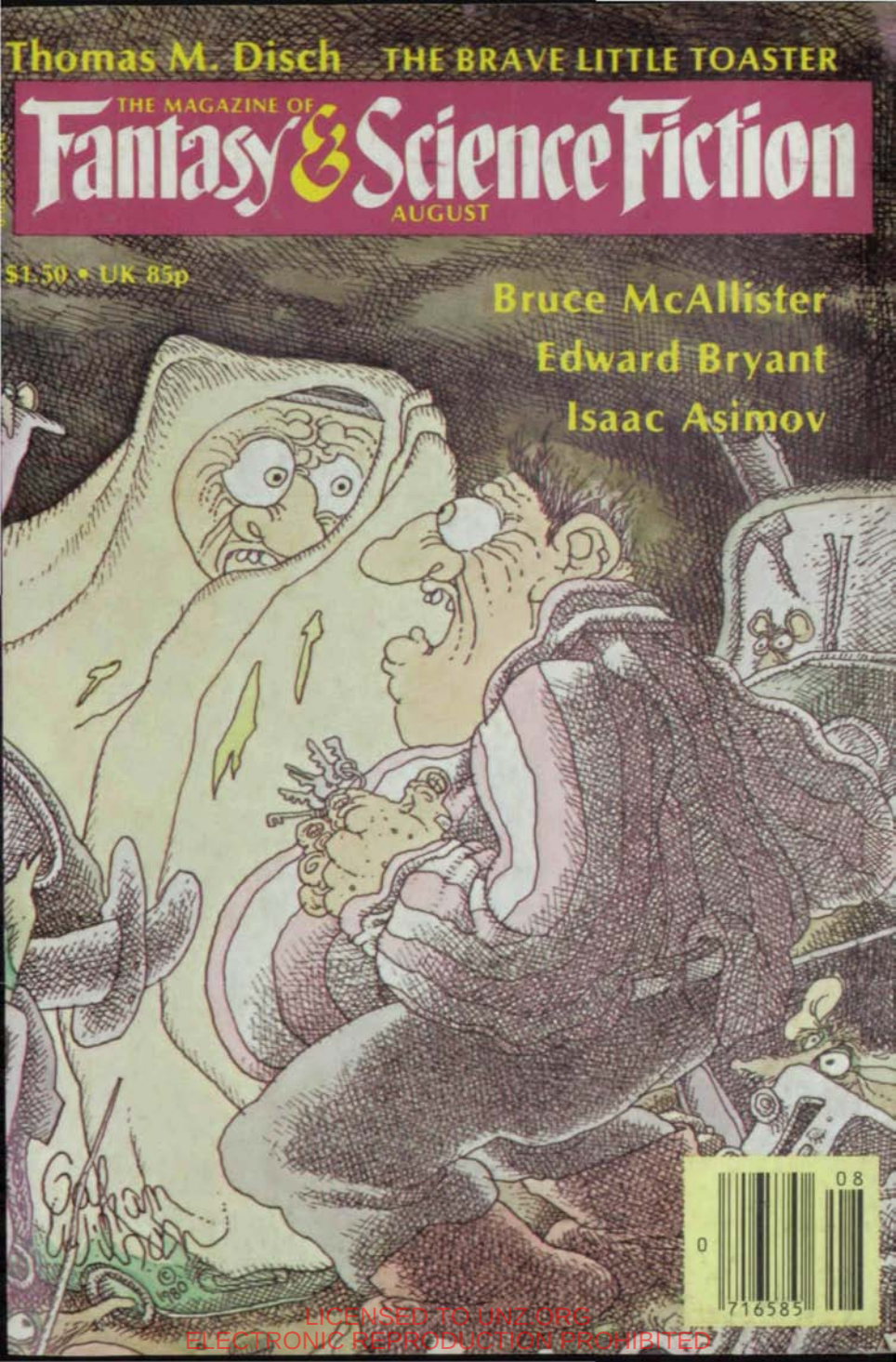

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COVER BY GAHAN WILSON FOR "THE BRAVE LITTLE TOASTER"

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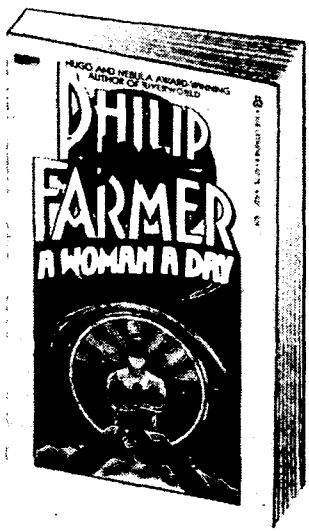


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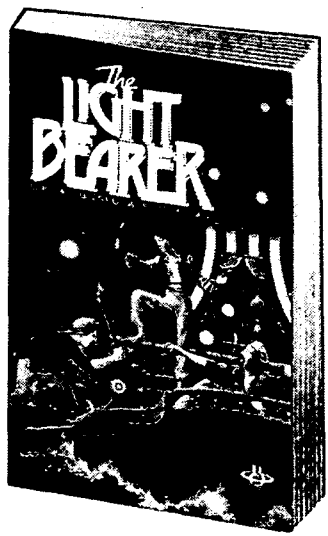


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*Here is Thomas Disch's first story since ON WINGS OF SONG (which has since been nominated for a Hugo and Nebula as well as The American Book Awards). This tale is about the adventures of five electrical appliances. They are minor appliances, which implies a degree of innocence, loyalty and dependability often missing from, say, a TV or washing machine. We venture to say that it has been a long time since such a cheerful and diverting group has appeared in the pages of this or any other magazine, and we guarantee that all of you will be charmed.*

# *The Brave Little Toaster*

BY
**THOMAS M. DISCH**

By the time the air conditioner had come to live in the summer cottage it was already wheezing and whining and going on about being old and useless and out-of-date. The other appliances had felt sorry and concerned, but when it finally did stop working altogether, they also felt a distinct relief. In all its time there it had never really been friendly — never really.

There were five appliances left in the cottage. The vacuum cleaner, being the oldest and a steady, dependable type besides (it was a Hoover), was their leader, insofar as they could be said to have one. Then there was an off-white plastic alarm clock/radio (AM only), a cheerful yellow electric blanket, and a tensor lamp who had come from a savings bank and would sometimes get to speculating, late at night, whether that made him better than ordinary store-bought appliances or worse. Finally, there was the toaster, a bright little Sunbeam. It was the youngest member of the little clan, and the only one of them who had lived all its life there at the cottage, the other four having come with the master from the city years and years and years ago.

It was a pleasant cottage—quite cold in the winter, of course, but appliances don't mind that. It stood on the northernmost edge of an immense forest, miles from any neighbors and



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## A Bedtime Story for Small Appliances

so far from the nearest highway that nothing was audible, day or night, but the peculiar hoots and rustlings of the forest and the reassuring sounds of the cottage itself—the creak of the timbers or the pattering of rain on windowpanes. They had grown set in their countrified ways and loved the little cottage dearly. Even if the chance had been offered them, which it wasn't, they wouldn't have wanted to be taken back to the city every year on Labor Day, the way that certain other appliances were, like the blender and the tv and the water pic. They *were* devoted to their master (that was just in their nature as appliances), but living so long in the woods had changed them in some nice, indefinable way that made the thought of any alternate lifestyle pretty nearly unthinkable.

The toaster was a special case. It had come straight to the cottage from a mail-order house, which tended to make it a little more curious about urban life than the other four. Often, left to itself, it would wonder what kind of toaster the master had in his city apartment, and it was privately of the opinion that whatever the brand of that other toaster it couldn't have made more perfect toast than the toaster made itself. Not too dark, not too light, but always the same uniform crunchy golden brown! However, it didn't come right out and say this in front of the others, since each of them was subject to periods of morbid misgivings as to its real utility. The old Hoover could maunder on for hours about the new breeds of vacuums with their low chassis, their long snaky hoses, and their disposable dust-bags. The radio regretted that it couldn't receive FM. The blanket felt it needed a dry cleaning, and the lamp could never regard an ordinary 100-watt bulb without a twinge of envy.

But the toaster was quite satisfied with itself, thank you. Though it knew from magazines that there were toasters who could toast four slices at a time, it didn't think that the master, who lived alone and seemed to have few friends, would have wanted a toaster of such institutional proportions. With toast, it's quality that mat-



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ters, not quantity: that was the toaster's credo.

Living in such a comfy cottage, surrounded by the strange and beautiful woods, you would have thought that the appliances would have had nothing to complain of, nothing to worry about. Alas, that was not the case. They were all quite wretched and fretful and in a quandry as to what to do—for the poor appliances had been abandoned.

"And the worst of it," said the radio, "is not knowing *why*."

"The worst of it," the tensor lamp agreed, "is being left in the dark this way. Without an explanation. Not knowing *what* may have become of the master."

"Two years," sighed the blanket, who had once been so bright and gay and was now so melancholy.

"It's more nearly two and a half," the radio pointed out. Being a clock as well as a radio, it had a keen sense of the passing time. "The master left on the 25th of September, 1973. Today is March 8, 1976. That's two years, five months, and thirteen days."

"Do you suppose," said the toaster, naming the secret dread none of them dared to speak aloud before, "that he knew, when he left, that he wouldn't be coming back? That he *knew* he was leaving us...and was afraid to say so? Is that possible?"

"No," declared the faithful old Hoover, "it is not! I can say quite confidently that our master would not have left a cottage full of serviceable appliances to...to rust!"

The blanket, lamp, and radio all hastened to agree that their master could never have dealt with them so uncaringly. Something had happened to him—an accident, an emergency.

"In that case," said the toaster, "we must just be patient and behave as though nothing unusual has happened. I'm sure that's what the master is counting on us to do."

And that is what they did. Every day, all through that spring and summer they kept to their appointed tasks. The radio/alarm would go off each morning at seven thirty sharp, and while it played some easy-listening music, the toaster (lacking real bread) would pretend to make two crispy slices of toast. Or, if the day seemed special in some way, it would toast an imaginary English muffin. Muffins of whatever sort have to be sliced *very* carefully if they're to fit into a toaster's slots. Otherwise, when they're done, they may not pop out easily. Generally it's wiser to do them under a broiler. However, there *wasn't* a broiler in the cottage, nothing but an old-fashioned gas ring, and so the toaster did the best it could. In any case, muffins that are only imaginary aren't liable to get stuck.

Such was the morning agenda. In the afternoon, if it were a Tuesday or a Friday, the old Hoover would rumble



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about the cottage vacuuming up every scrap of lint and speck of dust. This involved little actual picking up, as it was rather a small cottage, and was sealed very tight; so the dust and dirt had no way of getting inside, except on the days when the vacuum cleaner itself would trundle outdoors to empty a smidgen of dust at the edge of the forest.

At dusk the tensor lamp would switch its switch to the ON position, and all five appliances would sit about in the kitchen area of the single downstairs room, talking or listening to the day's news or just staring out the windows into the gloomy solitude of the forest. Then, when it was time for the other appliances to turn themselves off, the electric blanket would crawl up the stairs to the little sleeping loft, where, since the nights were usually quite chilly, even in midsummer, it would radiate a gentle warmth. How the master would have appreciated the blanket on those cold nights! How safe and cozy he'd have felt beneath its soft yellow wool and electric coils! If only he's been there.

At last, one sultry day toward the end of July, when the satisfactions of this dutiful and well-regulated life where beginning to wear thin, the little toaster spoke up again.

"We can't go on like this," it declared. "It isn't natural for appliances to live all by themselves. We need people to take care of, and we need people to take care of *us*. Soon, one by one, we'll all wear out, like the poor air conditioner. And no one will fix us, because no one will know what has happened."

"I daresay we're *all* of us sturdier than any air conditioner," said the blanket, trying to be brave. (Also, it is true, the blanket had never shown much fellow feeling for the air conditioner or any other appliances whose function was to make things cooler.)

"That's all very well for *you* to say," the tensor lamp retorted. "You'll go on for years, I suppose, but what will become of me when my bulb burns out? What will become of the radio when his tubes start to go?"

The radio made a dismal, staticky groan.

"The toaster is right," the old Hoovers said. "Something must be done. Something definitely must be done. Do any of you have a suggestion?"

"If we could telephone the master," said the toaster, thinking aloud, "the radio could simply ask him outright. *He'd* know what we should do. But the telephone has been disconnected for nearly three years."

"Two years, ten months, and three days, to be exact," said the radio/alarm.

"Then there's nothing else for us to do but to find the master ourselves."

The other four appliances looked at the toaster in mute amazement.

"It isn't unheard of," the toaster in-



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sisted. "Don't you remember—only last week there was a story that the radio was telling us, about a dear little fox terrier who'd been accidentally left behind, like us, at a summer cottage. What was his name?"

"Grover," said the radio. "We heard it on the *Early Morning Round-up.*"

"Right. And Grover found his way to his master, hundreds of miles away in a city somewhere in Canada."

"Winnipeg, as I recall," said the radio.

"Right. And to get there he had to cross swamps and mountains and face all sorts of dangers, but he finally did find his way. So, if one silly dog can do all that, think what five sensible appliances, working together, should be able to accomplish."

"Dogs have legs," the blanket objected.

"Oh, don't be a wet blanket," the toaster replied in a bantering way.

It should have known better. The blanket, who didn't have much of a sense of humor and whose feelings were therefore easily hurt, began to whimper and complain that it was time for it to go to bed. Nothing would serve, finally, but that the toaster should make a formal apology, which it did.

"Besides," said the blanket, mollified, "dogs have noses. That's how they find their way."

"As to that," said the old Hoover, "I'd like to see the nose that functions better than mine." And to demonstrate its capabilities in turned itself on and gave a deep, rumbling snuffle up and down the rug.

"Splendid!" declared the toaster. "The vacuum shall be our nose—and our legs as well."

The Hoover turned itself off and said, "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, I meant to say our *wheels*. Wheels, as I'm sure everyone knows by now, are really more efficient than legs."

"What about the rest of us," the blanket demanded, "who don't have wheels *or* legs? What shall *we* do? I can't *crawl* all the way to wherever it is, and if I tried to, I'd soon be shredded to rags."

The blanket was certainly in a fretful state, but the toaster was a born diplomat, answering every objection in a tone of sweet, unswervable logic.

"You're entirely right, and the radio and I would be in an even sorrier state if we tried to travel such a distance on our own. But that isn't necessary. Because we'll *borrow* some wheels...."

The tensor lamp lighted up. "And build a kind of carriage!"

"And *ride* all the way there," said the radio, "in comfort and luxury." It sounded, at such moments, exactly like the announcer in an advertisement.

"Well, I'm not sure," said the blanket. "I *might* be able to do that."

"The question is," said the toaster, turning to the Hoover, "will *you* be



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able to?"

Deep in its motor the vacuum cleaner rumbled a rumble of quiet confidence.

It was not as easy a matter as the toaster had supposed to find a serviceable set of wheels. Those he'd had in mind at first belonged to the lawnmower out in the lean-to shed, but the task of disconnecting them from the mower's heavy blades was beyond the appliances' limited know-how. So, unless the Hoover were willing to cut a swatch of lawn everywhere it went, which it wasn't, the lawnmowers' sturdy rubber wheels had to be put out of mind.

The blanket, who was now full of the spirit of adventure, suggested that the bed in the sleeping loft might be used, since it had four castor-type wheels. However, the weight and unwieldiness of the bed were such as to rule out that notion as well. Even on a level road the Hoover would not have had the strength to draw such a load — much less across raw wilderness!

And that seemed to be that. There were no other wheels to be found anywhere about the cottage, unless one counted a tiny knife-sharpener that worked by being rolled along the counter top. The toaster racked its brains trying to turn the knife-sharpener to account, but what kind of carriage can you build with a single wheel that is one and a half inches in diameter?

Then, one Friday, as the Hoover was doing its chores, the idea the toaster had been waiting for finally arrived. The Hoover, as usual, had been grumbling about the old metal office chair that stood in front of the master's desk. No amount of nudging and bumping would ever dislodge its tubular legs from where they bore down on the rug. As the vacuum became more and more fussed, the toaster realized that the chair would have moved very easily...*if it had still possessed its original wheels!*

It took the five appliances the better part of an afternoon to jack up the bed in the sleeping loft and remove the castors. But it was no trouble at all to put them on the chair. They slipped right into the tubular legs as though they'd been made for it. Interchangeable parts *are* such a blessing.

And there it was, their carriage, ready to roll. There was quite enough room on the padded seat for all four riders, and being so high it gave them a good view besides. They spent the rest of the day delightedly driving back and forth between the cottage's overgrown flower beds and down the gravel drive to the mailbox. There, however, they had to stop, for that was as far as the Hoover could get, using every extension cord in the cottage.

"If only," said the radio with a



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longing sigh, "I still had my old batteries...."

"Batteries?" inquired the toaster. "I didn't know you had batteries."

"It was before you joined us," said the radio sadly. "When I was new. After my first batteries corroded, the master didn't see fit to replace them. What need had I for batteries when I could always use the house current?"

"I don't see what possible relevance your little volt-and-a-half batteries could have to *my* problem," observed the Hoover testily.

The radio looked hurt. Usually the Hoover would never have made such an unkind and slighting remark, but the weeks of worry were having their effect on all of them.

"It's *our* problem," the toaster pointed out in a tone of mild reproof, "and the radio is right, you know. If we *could* find a large enough battery, we could strap it under the seat of the chair and set off this very afternoon."

"If!" sniffed the Hoover scornfully. "If! If!"

"And I know where there may be a battery as big as we need!" the tensor lamp piped. "Have you ever looked inside that lean-to behind the cottage?"

"Into the tool shed!" said the blanket with a shudder of horror. "Certainly not! It's dark and musty and filled with spiders."

"Well, I was in it just yesterday, poking about, and there was *something* behind the broken rake and some old paint cans—a big, black, boxy thing. Of course it was nothing like *your* pretty red cylinders." The tensor lamp tipped its hood towards the radio. "But now that I think of it, it may have been a *kind* of battery."

The appliances all trooped out to the lean-to, and there in the darkest corner, just as the lamp had supposed, was the spare battery that had come from the master's old Volkswagen. The battery had been brand-new at the time that he'd decided to trade in the VW on a yellow Saab, and so he'd replaced it with a less valuable battery, keeping this one in the lean-to and then—wasn't it just his way?—forgetting all about it.

Between them, the old Hoover and the toaster knew enough about the basic principles of electricity to be able, very quickly, to wire the battery so that it would serve their needs instead of an automobile's. But before any of the small appliances who may be listening to this tale should begin to think that they might do the same thing, let them be warned: ELECTRICITY IS VERY DANGEROUS. *Never* play with old batteries! *Never* put your plug in a strange socket! And if you are in any doubt about the voltage of the current where you are living, *ask a major appliance.*

And so they set off to find their master in the faraway city where he lived. Soon the dear little summer cottage was lost from sight behind the leaves and branches of the forest trees.



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Deeper and deeper they journeyed into the woods. Only the dimmest dapplings of sunlight penetrated through the dense tangle overhead to guide them on their way. The path wound round and twisted about with bewildering complexity. The road map they had brought with them proved quite useless.

It would have been ever so much easier, of course, to have followed the highway directly into the city, since that is where highways always go. Unfortunately that option was not open to them. Five such sturdy and functional appliances would certainly not have been able to escape the notice of human beings traveling along the same thoroughfare, and it is a rule, which all appliances must obey, that whenever human beings are observing them they must remain perfectly still. On a busy highway they would therefore have been immobilized most of the time. Besides, there was an even stronger reason for staying off the highway—the danger of pirates. But that's a possibility so frightening and awful that we should all simply refuse to think any more about it. Anyhow who ever heard of pirates in the middle of the woods?

The path twisted and turned and rose and fell, and the poor old Hoover became very tired indeed. Even with the power from the battery it was no easy task making its way over such a rugged terrain, especially with the added burden of the office chair and its four riders. But except for its rumbling a little more loudly than usual the old vacuum cleaner did its job without a complaint. What a lesson for us all!

As for the rest of them, they were in the highest spirits. The lamp craned its long neck every which way, exclaiming over the views, and even the blanket soon forgot its fears and joined in the general spirit of holiday adventuring. The toaster's coils were in a continual tingle of excitement. It was all so strange and interesting and full of new information!

"Isn't it wonderful!" exclaimed the radio. "Listen! Do you hear them? Birds!" It did an imitation of the song it had just heard—not one that would have fooled any of the actual birds there in the forest, for in truth it sounded more like a clarinet than a bird. Even so, a thrush, a wood pigeon, and several chickadees did come fluttering down from their roosts and perches high above to cock their heads and listen. But only a moment. After a twitter or two of polite approval they returned to the trees. Birds are like that. They'll pay attention to you for a minute or two and then go right back to being birds.

The radio pretended not to feel slighted, but he soon left off doing imitations and recited, instead, some of his favorite ads, the beautiful songs about Coca-Cola and Esso and a long comic jingle about Barney's Hi-Styles for Guys and Gals. There's nothing that so instantly civilizes a forest as the



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sound of a familiar advertisement, and soon they were all feeling a lot more confident and cheerful.

As the day wore on, the Hoover was obliged to stop for a rest more and more frequently—ostensibly to empty its dustbag. "Can you believe," it grieved, shaking a last moldering leaf from the bag, "how filthy this forest is?"

"On the contrary," the blanket declared. "It's thoroughly agreeable. The air's so fresh, and just feel the breeze! I feel renewed, as if I'd just come out of my original box. Oh, why, why, why don't they ever take electric blankets on picnics? It isn't fair!"

"Enjoy it while it lasts, kiddo," said the radio ominously. "According to the latest Weather and Traffic Round-up, we're in for rain."

"Won't the trees work like a roof?" asked the lamp. "They keep the sunlight out well enough."

None of them knew the answer to the lamp's question, but as it happens, trees do not work like a roof. They all got more or less wet, and the poor blanket was drenched through and through. Fortunately the storm did not last long and the sun came out immediately afterwards. The wet appliances trudged on along the muddy path, which led them, after a little while, to a clearing in the wood. There in a glade full of sunshine and flowers the blanket was able to spread itself out on the grass and begin to get dry.

The afternoon was wearing on, and the toaster had begun to feel, as all of us do at times, a definite need for solitude. Much as it liked its fellow appliances, it wasn't used to spending the entire day socializing. It longed to be off by itself a moment to be private and think its own thoughts. So, without saying anything to the others, it made its way to the farthest corner of the meadow and began to toast an imaginary muffin. That was always the best way to unwind when things got to be too much for it.

The imaginary muffin had scarcely begun to warm before the toaster's reveries were interrupted by the gentlest of interrogatories.

> "Charming flower, tell me, do,
> What genera and species you
> Belong to. I, as may be seen
> At once, am just a daisy, green
> Of leaf and white of petal. You
> Are neither green nor white nor blue
> Nor any color I have known.
> In what Eden have you grown?
> Sprang you from earth or sky above?
> In either case, accept my love."

"Why, thank you," the toaster replied, addressing the daisy that was pressing its petaled face close to the toaster's gleaming chrome. It's kind of you to ask, but in fact I'm not a flower at all. I'm an electric toaster."

> "Flower, forebear! You can't deceive
> The being that adores you. Weave
> Your thick black root with mine.
> O beautiful! O half-divine!"



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These fervent declarations so embarrassed the toaster that for a moment it was at a loss for words. It had never heard flowers speaking in their own language and didn't realize how they would say any absurd thing that would help them to a rhyme. Flowers, as botanists well know, can only speak in verse. Daisies, being among the simpler flowers, characteristically employ a rough sort of octosyllabic doggerel, but more evolved species, especially those in the tropics, can produce sestinas, rondeaux, and villanelles of the highest order.

The daisy was not, however, simply snared in its own rhyme scheme. It had genuinely fallen in love with the toaster—or, rather, with its own reflection in the toaster's side. Here was a flower (the daisy reflected) strangely like itself and yet utterly unlike itself too. Such a paradox has often been the basis for the most impassioned love. The daisy writhed on its stem and fluttered its white petals as though in the grip of cyclone winds.

The toaster, thoroughly alarmed by such immoderate behavior, said that it really was time to be getting back to its friends on the other side of the meadow.

"Oh, stay, beloved blossom,
stay!
They say our lives are but a day:
If that be true, how shall I bear
To spend that brief day anywhere
Except with you? You are my
light,
My soil, my air. Stay but one
night
Beside me here—I ask no more.
Stay, lovely bloom—let me adore
Those polished petals bright as the
dew
When dawn attempts to rival you,
That single perfect coiling root—
Imperishable! Absolute!
O beautiful! O half-divine!
Weave your thick black root with
mine."

"Now really," said the toaster in a tone of gentle reprimand, "there's no cause to be carrying on like this. We scarcely know each other, and, what's more, you seem to be under a misapprehension as to my nature. Can't you see that what you call my root is an electric cord? As to petals, I can't think *what* you may mean, for I simply don't have any. Now—I really must go and join my friends, for we are journeying to our master's apartment far, far away, and we shall never get there if we don't get a move on."

"Alas the day and woe is me!
I tremble in such misery
As never flower knew before.
If you must go, let me implore
One parting boon, one final gift:
Be merciful as you are swift
And pluck me from my native
ground—
Pluck me and take me where
you're bound.
I cannot live without you here:
Then let your bosom be my bier."

Feeling truly shocked by the daisy's suggestion and seeing that the creature



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was deaf to reason, the toaster hastened to the other side of the meadow and began to urge his friends to set out at once on their journey. The blanket protested that it was still somewhat damp, the Hoover that it was still tired, and the lamp proposed that they spend the night there in the meadow.

And that is what they did. As soon as it grew dark the blanket folded itself into a kind of tent, and the others all crawled inside. The lamp turned itself on, and the radio played some easy-listening music—but very quietly, so as not to disturb other denizens of the forest who might already be asleep. Soon they were asleep themselves. Travel does take it out of you.

The alarm clock had set itself, as usual, for seven-thirty, but the appliances were awake well before that hour. The vacuum cleaner and the lamp both complained, on rising, of a certain stiffness in their joints. However, as soon as they were on their way, the stiffness seemed to melt away.

In the morning light the forest appeared lovelier than ever. Cobwebs glistening with dew were strung like miniature power lines from bough to bough. Pretty mushrooms sprouted from fallen logs, looking for all the world like a string of frosted light bulbs. Leaves rustled. Birds chirped.

The radio was certain that it saw a real fox and wanted to go off after it. "Just to be sure, you know, that it *is* a fox."

The blanket grew quite upset at this suggestion. It had already snagged itself once or twice on low-hanging branches. What ever would become of it, it wanted to know, if it were to venture from the path and into the dense tangle of the forest itself.

"But think," the radio insisted, "—a fox! We'll never have such a chance again."

"*I'd* like to see it," said the lamp.

The toaster, too, was terribly curious, but it could appreciate the blanket's point of view, and so it urged them to continue along the path. "Because, don't you see, we must reach the master as soon as we possibly can."

This was so inarguably true that the radio and lamp readily assented, and they continued on their way. The sun rose in the sky until it had risen all it could, and the path stretched on and on. In the midafternoon there was another shower, after which they once again made camp. Not, this time, in a meadow, for the woods were now quite dense, and the only open places were those under the larger trees. So instead of sunning itself on the grass (for there was neither grass nor sunlight to be found) the blanket hung itself, with the Hoover's help, from the lowest limb of an immense and ancient oak. In minutes it had flapped itself dry.

At twilight, just as the lamp was thinking of turning itself on, there was



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a stir among the leaves on the branch to the right of the branch from which the blanket was contentedly hanging.

"Hello!" said a squirrel, emerging from the clustered leaves. "I *thought* we had visitors."

"Hello," replied all the appliances together.

"Well, well, well!" The squirrel licked his whiskers. "What do you say then, eh?"

"About what?" asked the toaster, who was not being unfriendly, but who could be a little literal-minded at times, especially when it was tired.

The squirrel looked discountenanced. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Harold." Having pronounced his name, his good humor seemed completely restored. "And this fair creature—"

Another squirrel dropped from a higher branch and lighted beside Harold.

"—is my wife Marjorie."

"Now you must tell us your names," said Marjorie, "since we've just told you ours."

"We don't have names, I'm afraid," said the toaster. "You see, we're appliances."

"If you don't have names," Harold demanded, "how do you know which of you are men and which are women?"

"We aren't either. We're appliances." The toaster turned to the Hoover for confirmation.

"Whatever *that* may mean," said Marjorie brusquely. "It can't alter a universal law. Everyone is either a man or a woman. Mice are. Birds are. Even, I'm given to understand, insects." She held her paw up to her lips and tittered. "Do you like to eat insects?"

"No," said the toaster. "Not at all." It would have been more trouble than it was worth to explain to the squirrels that appliances didn't eat anything.

"Neither do I, *really*," said Marjorie. "But I love nuts. Do you have any with you? Possibly in that old sack?"

"No," said the Hoover stiffly. "There is nothing in that old sack, as you call it, but dirt. About five pounds of dirt, I'd estimate."

"And what is the use, pray, of saving dirt?" asked Harold. When no answer seemed forthcoming, he said, "I know what we'd all enjoy doing. We can tell jokes. You start."

"I don't think I know any jokes," said the Hoover.

"Oh, I do," said the radio. "You're not Polish, are you?"

The squirrels shook their heads.

"Good. Tell me—why does it take three Poles to screw in a light bulb?"

Marjorie giggled expectantly. "I don't know—why?"

"One to hold the light bulb, and the other two to turn the ladder around."

The squirrels looked at each other with bewilderment.

"Explain it," said Harold. "Which are the men and which are the women?"



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"It doesn't matter. They're just very stupid. That's the whole idea of Polish jokes, that Poles are supposed to be so stupid that no matter what they try and do they misfunction. Of course, it's not fair to Poles, who are probably as bright as anyone else, but they are funny jokes. I know hundreds more."

"Well, if that was a fair sample, I can't say I'm very keen to hear the rest," said Marjorie. "Harold, you tell him—"

"It," the radio corrected. "We're all it's."

"Tell *them*," Marjorie continued, "the one about the three squirrels out in the snow." She turned to the lamp confidingly. "This will lay you out. Believe me."

As Harold told the joke about the three squirrels in the snow, the appliances exchanged glances of guarded disapproval. It wasn't just that they disapproved of dirty jokes (especially the old Hoover); in addition, they didn't find such jokes amusing. Gender and the complications it gives rise to simply aren't relevant to the lives appliances lead.

Harold finished his joke, and Marjorie laughed loyally, but none of the appliances cracked a smile.

"Well," said Harold, miffed, "I hope you enjoy your stay under *our* oak."

With which, and a flick of their big furry tails, the two squirrels scampered up the trunk and out of sight.

In the small hours of the night the toaster woke from a terrible nightmare in which it had been about to fall into a bathtub full of water to discover itself in a plight almost as terrible. Thunder was thundering, and lightning was streaking the sky, and rain was pelting it mercilessly. At first the toaster couldn't remember where it was or why it was there, and when it did remember, it realized with dismay that the electric blanket, which ought to have been spread out and sheltering the other four appliances, had disappeared! And the rest of them? They were still here, thank heaven, though in a state of fearful apprehension, each one of them.

"Oh dear," groaned the Hoover, "I should have *known*, I should have *known!* We never, never should have left our home."

The lamp in an extremity of speechless agitation was twisting its head rapidly from side to side, casting its little beam of light across the gnarled roots of the oak, while the radio's alarm had gone off and would not stop ringing. Finally the toaster went over to the radio and turned the alarm off itself.

"Oh, thank you," said the radio, its voice blurry with static. "Thank you so much."

"Where is the blanket?" the toaster demanded apprehensively.

"Blown away!" said the radio. "Blown off to the far end of the forest, where we shall never be able to find it!"



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"Oh, I should have *known!*" groaned the Hoover. "I should have *known!*"

"It's not your fault," the toaster assured the vacuum, but it only groaned the louder.

Seeing that it could not be of any help to the vacuum, the toaster went over to the lamp and tried to calm it down. Once its beam was steady, the toaster suggested that it be directed into the branches above them, on the chance that the blanket, when it was blown away, might have been snagged on one of them. The lamp did so, but it was a very faint light and a very tall oak and a very dark night, and the blanket, if it were up there, was not to be seen.

All of a sudden there was a flash of lightning. The radio's alarm went off again, and the lamp shrieked and folded itself up as small as could be. Of course it's silly to be afraid of lightning, since it's only another form of electricity. But such a large form—and so uncontrolled! If you were a person, instead of an appliance, and you encountered a berserk giant many times larger than yourself, you'd have some idea how the average electric appliance feels about lightning.

In the brief moment that the lightning was lighting everything up, the toaster, who had been peering up into the oak, was able to make out a shape — all twisted about—that *might* have been the blanket. The toaster waited until there was another lightning flash; and, yes, definitely, it *was* the yellow blanket, which had indeed become snagged on one of the highest branches of the tree.

Once they all knew that the blanket was nearby, even though they still had no idea how they'd be able to get it down, the storm ceased to seem quite so scary. The rain made them quite miserable, as rain will do, but their worst anxieties were over. Even the occasional bolt of lightning was now something to be wished for rather than dreaded, since by its brightness they could glimpse their companion high above them, clutching to the limb of the oak and flailing in the ceaseless winds. How could they feel afraid, or even sorry for themselves, when they considered the terrors the poor blanket must be experiencing?

By morning the storm had abated. The radio, at top volume, called up to the blanket, but the blanket made no response. For one horrible moment the toaster thought its friend might have stopped working altogether. But the radio kept on calling to the blanket, and after a time it made a feeble reply, waving one wet bedraggled corner at its friends.

"YOU CAN COME DOWN NOW," the radio shouted. "THE STORM IS OVER."

"I *can't*," said the blanket with a whimper. "I'm stuck. I *can't* get down."

"You must try," the toaster urged.

"What's that?" said the blanket.

"THE TOASTER SAYS YOU MUST TRY!"



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"But I told you—I'm *stuck*. And there's a great rip right through the center of me. And another by my hem. And I hurt." The blanket began to wring itself convulsively, and a steady patter of droplets fell from its rain-soaked wool into the puddles below.

"What the deuce is all this racket about?" Harold demanded imperiously, stepping forth from his nest high in the trunk of the oak. "Do you have any idea what *time* it is? Squirrels are trying to sleep."

The radio apologized to Harold and then explained the cause of the commotion. Like most squirrels, Harold was essentially kind-hearted, and when he saw what had happened to the blanket, he immediately offered his assistance. First he went into his nest and woke his wife. Then together the two squirrels began to help the blanket to loosen itself from where it had been snared. It was a long and—to judge by the blanket's cries—painful process, but at last it was done, and with the squirrels' help the liberated blanket made its way, slowly and carefully, down the trunk of the tree.

The appliances gathered round their friend, commiserating over his many injuries and rejoicing at his rescue.

"How shall we ever be able to repay you?" said the toaster warmly, turning to Harold and Marjorie. "You've saved our friend from a fate too terrible to imagine. We're *so* grateful."

"Well," said Marjorie cagily, "I can't remember whether or not you said you had any nuts with you. But if you do...."

"Believe me," said the Hoover, "if we did, you would have them all. But you can see for yourselves that my bag contains nothing but dust and dirt." Whereupon it opened its dustbag and a thick brown sludge of rain-sodden topsoil oozed forth.

"Though we don't have nuts," said the toaster to the disconsolate squirrels, "perhaps there is something *I* could do for you. That is, if you like *roasted* nuts."

"Indeed, yes," said Harold. "Any kind will do."

"Then if you can provide me with some nuts, I shall roast them. As many as you like."

Harold narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "You mean you want us to give *you* the nuts *we've* been storing up all this summer?"

"If you'd like me to roast them," answered the toaster brightly.

"Oh, darling, do," Marjorie urged. "I don't know what he means to do, but *he* seems to. And we might like it."

"I think it's a trick," said Harold.

"Just two or three of the ones that are left from last year. Please?"

"Oh, very well."

Harold scampered up the tree trunk to his nest and returned with four acorns stuffed in the pouches of his cheeks. At the toaster's bidding Harold and Marjorie cracked them open, and



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then Harold placed them carefully on the thin strips of metal that went up and down inside the toaster's slots. As these strips were meant to accommodate large slices of bread, it had to be very careful lest the tiny round acorns should roll off as it lowered them into itself. When this was done it turned on its coils and commenced toasting them. When the acorns were starting to turn a crispy brown, the toaster lifted them up gently as far as it could, turned off its coils, and (when it judged the squirrels would not burn their paws by reaching in) bade them take out the roasted nuts and taste them.

"Delicious!" Marjorie declared.

"Exquisite!" Harold agreed.

As soon as the squirrels had eaten the first four acorns, they returned to their nest for more, and when those were gone still more, and then again some more after that. Marjorie, especially, was insatiable. She urged the toaster to remain in the forest as their guest. It could stay in their own nest, where it would always be dry and cozy, and she would introduce it to all their friends.

"I'd love to be able to accept," said the toaster, from a sense not only of politeness but of deep obligation as well, "but it really isn't possible. Once I've roasted your nuts for you—would you like some more?—we *must* be on our way to the city where our master lives."

While the toaster roasted some more acorns, the radio explained to the squirrels the important reason for their journey. It also demonstrated its own capacities as a utensil and persuaded the other appliances to do the same. The poor Hoover was scarcely able to function from having been clogged with mud, and the squirrels, in any case, could not see the point of sweeping up dirt from one place and putting it somewhere else. Nor did the lamp's beams or the radio's music excite their admiration. However, they were both very taken with the electric blanket, which, damp as it was, had plugged itself into the battery strapped under the office chair and was glowing warmly. Marjorie renewed her invitation to the toaster and extended it to the blanket as well. "Until," she explained, "you're quite well again."

"That's very kind," said the blanket, "and of course I'm *so* grateful for all you've done. But we must be on our way. Truly."

Marjorie sighed resignedly. "At least," she said, "keep your tail tucked into that black thing that makes the furry part of you so delightfully hot. Until you have to leave. The warmth is so pleasant. Isn't it, my dear?"

"Oh, yes," said Harold, who was busy shelling acorns. "Most agreeable."

The Hoover ventured a mild protest, for it feared that with both the toaster and the blanket working so hard the battery would be worn down needlessly. But really what else could they do but comply with the squirrels'



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request? Besides, quite apart from their debt of gratitude, it felt so good to be useful again! The toaster would have gone on gladly roasting acorns all morning and all afternoon, and the squirrels seemed of much the same disposition.

"It's strange," said Harold complacently, while he stroked the toaster's side (now sadly streaked with raindrop patterns like the outside of a window), "it's more than strange that you should maintain you have no sex, when it's very clear to me that you're male." He studied his own face in the mottled chromium. "You have a man's whiskers and a man's front teeth."

"Nonsense, darling," said his wife, who was lying on the other side of the toaster. "Now that I look carefully, I can see her whiskers are most definitely a woman's whiskers and teeth as well."

"I won't argue, my love, about anything so patently obvious as whether or not a man is a man, for it's evident that he is!"

It suddenly dawned on the toaster how the squirrels—and the daisy the day before—had come by their confusions. They were seeing *themselves* in his sides! Living in the wild as they did, where there are no bathroom mirrors, they were unacquainted with the principle of reflectivity. It considered trying to explain their error to them, but what would be the use? They would only go away with hurt feelings. You can't always expect people, or squirrels, to be rational. Appliances, yes—appliances have to be rational, because they're built that way.

To Harold the toaster explained, under seal of strictest secrecy, that it was indeed, just as he had supposed, a man; and to Marjorie it confided, under a similar pact of trust, that it was a woman. It hoped they were both true to their promises. If not, their argument would be fated to continue for a long, long while.

With its coils turned to HIGH, the blanket was soon quite dry, and so, after a final round of roast acorns, the appliances said good-bye to Harold and Marjorie and continued on their way.

And what a long and weary way it was! The forest stretched on seemingly forever with the most montonous predictability, each tree just like the next—trunk, branches, leaves; trunk, branches, leaves. Of course a tree would have taken a different view of the matter. We all tend to see the way *others* are alike and how *we* differ, and it's probably just as well we do, since that prevents a great deal of confusion. But perhaps we should remind ourselves from time to time that ours is a very partial view, and that the world is full of a great deal more variety than we ever manage to take in. At this stage of their journey, however, the appliances had lost sight of this important truth, and they were very



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bored and impatient, in addition simply to being worn to a frazzle. Rust spots had begun to develop alarmingly on the unchromed bottom of the toaster and inside it as well. The stiffness that the vacuum and lamp complained of each morning on rising no longer vanished with a bit of exercise but persisted through the day. As for the blanket, it was almost in tatters, poor thing. Alone of the appliances, the radio seemed not to have suffered damage from the demands of the trip.

The toaster began to worry that when they did at last arrive at the master's apartment they would be in such raggle-taggle condition that he would have no further use for them. They'd be put on the scrap heap, and all their efforts to reach him would have been in vain! What a dreadful reward for so much loyalty and devotion! But it is a rare human being who will be swayed by considerations of the heart in his dealings with appliances, and the master, as the toaster well knew, was not notable for his tender conscience. Its own predecessor at the cottage had still been quite serviceable when it had been sent to the dump, its only faults having been that its chrome had been worn away in patches and that its sense of timing was sometimes erratic. In its youth the toaster had thought these sufficient grounds for the older appliance's replacement, but now....

Now it was better not to think about such matters. Better simply to pursue one's duty wherever it led, along the path through the forest.

Until, at the bank of a wide river, that path finally came to an end.

They were all, at first sight of that broad impassable expanse of water, utterly cast-down and despairing, none more so than the Hoover, which became almost incoherent in its distress. "No!" it roared aloud. "I refuse! Never! Oh! Stop, turn me off, empty my bag, leave me alone, go away!" It began to choke and sputter, and then ran over its own cord and started chewing on it. Only the toaster had enough presence of mind to wrest the cord from the vacuum's powerful suction grip. Then, to calm it down, it led the Hoover back and forth across the grassy bank of the river in regular, carpet-sweeping swathes.

At last these habitual motions brought the Hoover round to a more reasonable frame of mind, and it was able to account for its extraordinary alarm. It was not only the sight of this new obstacle that had distressed it so, but, as well, its certainty that the battery was now too run-down for them to be able to return to the cottage by its power. They could not go forward and they could not turn back. They were marooned! Marooned in the middle of the forest, and soon it would be fall and they would have no shelter from the inclemencies of the autumn weather, and then it would be winter and they'd be buried in the snow.


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Their metal parts would corrode. The Hoover's rubber belt would crack. They would be powerless to resist the forces that would slowly but surely debilitate and destroy them, and in only a few months—or even weeks—they would all be unable to work.

No wonder the Hoover, foreseeing this inevitable progression of events, had been beside itself. What *were* they to do? the toaster asked itself.

There was no answer immediately forthcoming.

Toward evening the radio announced that it was receiving interferene from a source quite nearby. "A power drill, by the feel of it. Just on the other side of the river."

Where there was a power drill there were bound to be power lines as well! New hope poured into the appliances like a sudden surge of current.

"Let's look at the map again," said the lamp. "Maybe we can figure out exactly where we are."

Following the lamp's suggestion, they unfolded the road map and looked very carefully at all the dots and squiggles between the spot (marked with a Magic Marker) along the highway where the cottage was situated and the little patch of pink representing the city they were bound for. At last, only a quarter-inch from the pink patch of the city, they found the wavery blue line that had to be the river they'd come to, since there were no other blue lines anywhere between the cottage and the city, and this river was much too big for the mapmakers to have forgotten all about it.

"We're almost there!" the radio trumpeted. "We'll make it! Everything will be all right! Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" the other appliances agreed, except for the Hoover, who wasn't so easily convinced that all would now be well. But when the lamp pointed out four distinct places where the river was traversed by highways, even the Hoover had to admit that there was cause to cheer up, though he still wouldn't go so far as to say "Hurrah."

"We only have to follow the river," said the toaster, who did like to give instructions, even when it was obvious what had to be done, "either to the left or the right, and eventually it must lead us to one of those bridges. Then, when it's very late and there's no traffic, we can make a dash for it!"

So once again they set off with courage renewed and determination strengthened. It was not so light a task as the toaster had made it sound, for there was no longer a clear path to follow. Sometimes the bank of the river lay flat as a carpet, but elsewhere the ground got quite bumpy or—what was worse—quaggy and soft. Once, avoiding a rock, the Hoover took a sharp turn; and the office chair, getting a leg mired in an unremarked patch of mud, was overturned, and the four appliances riding on it tumbled off the plastic seat into a thorough slough.



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They emerged smirched and spattered, and were obliged to become dirtier still in the process of retrieving the castor wheel that had come off the chair and was lost in the mud.

The blanket, naturally, was exempted from this task, and while the four others delved for the lost wheel, it betook itself down the water's edge and attempted to wash away the signs of its spill. Lacking any cloth or sponge, the blanket only succeeded, sad to say, in spreading the stains over a larger area. So preoccupied was the blanket with its hopeless task that it almost failed to notice—

"A boat!" the blanket cried out. "All of you, come here! I've found a boat!"

Even the toaster, with no experience at all in nautical matters, could see that the boat the blanket had discovered was not of the first quality. Its wood had the weather-beaten look of the clapboard at the back of the summer cottage that the master had always been meaning to replace, or at least repaint, and its bottom must be leaky for it was filled with one big puddle of green mush. Nevertheless, it must have been basically serviceable, since a Chriscraft outboard motor was mounted on the blunt back-end, and who would put an expensive motor on a boat that couldn't at least stay afloat?

"How providential," said the Hoover.

"You don't intend for us to *use* this boat, do you?" asked the toaster.

"Of course we shall," replied the vacuum. "Who knows how far it may be to a bridge? This will take us across the river directly. You're not afraid to ride in it, are you?"

"Afraid? Certainly not!"

"Well, then?"

"It doesn't *belong* to us. if we were to take it, we'd be no better than ...than pirates!"

Pirates, as even the newest of my listeners will have been informed, are people who take things that belong to other people. They are the bane of an appliance's existence, since once an appliance has been spirited away by a pirate, it has no choice but to serve its bidding just as though it were that appliances' legitimate master. A bitter disgrace, such servitude—and one that few appliances can hope to escape once it has fallen to their lot. Truly, there is no fate, even obsolescence, so terrible as falling into the hands of pirates.

"Pirates!" exclaimed the Hoover. "Us? What nonsense? Who ever heard of an appliance that was a pirate?"

"But if we took the boat—" the toaster insisted.

"We wouldn't *keep* it," said the Hoover brusquely. "We'd just borrow it a little while to cross the river and leave it on the other side. Its owner would get it back soon enough."

"How long we'd have it for doesn't matter. It's the *principle* of the thing. Taking what isn't yours is piracy."

"Oh, as for principles," said the radio lightly, "there's a well-known



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saying: *'From* each according to his *ability, to* each according to his need.' Which means, as far as I can see, that someone who makes use of his abilities should get to use a boat when he or it needs to cross a river and the boat is just sitting there waiting." With which, and a little chuckle besides, the radio hopped onto the foremost seat of the rowboat.

Following the radio's example, the Hoover heaved the office chair into the back of the boat and then got in itself. The boat settled deep in the water.

Avoiding the toaster's accusing look, the blanket took a seat beside the radio.

The lamp seemed to hesitate, but only for a moment. Then it too entered the boat.

"Well?" said the Hoover gruffly. "We're waiting."

Reluctantly the toaster prepared to board the boat. But then, inexplicably, *something made it stop.* What's happening? it wondered—though it could not say the words aloud, for the same force preventing it from moving prevented its speech as well.

The four appliances in the boat had been similarly incapacitated. What had happened, of course, was that the owner of the boat had returned and *seen* the appliances. "Why, what's this?" he exclaimed, stepping from behind a willow tree with a fishing rod in one hand and a string of sunfish in the other. "It seems we've had some visitors!"

He said much more than this, but in a manner so rough and ill-mannered that it were better not to repeat his words verbatim. The sum of it was this —that he believed the owner of the appliances had been about to steal his boat, and so he intended, by way of retaliation, to steal the appliances!

He took the toaster from where it sat spellbound on the grassy riverbank and set it in the rowboat beside the blanket, lamp and radio. Then, unfastening the battery from the office chair, he threw the latter end-over-end high up into the air. It came down—Splash!—in the middle of the river and sank down to the muddy bottom, nevermore to be seen.

Then the pirate—for there could no longer be any doubt that such he was—started the Chriscraft motor and set off upstream with his five helpless captives.

After mooring his boat alongside a ramshackle dock on the other side of the river, the pirate loaded the outboard motor and the appliances onto the wooden bed of a very dusty pickup truck—except for the radio, which he took with him into the front seat. As it drove off, the truck jolted and jounced and bolted and bounced so violently the toaster feared the ride would cost it every coil in its body. (For though toasters look quite sturdy, they are actually among the more delicate appliances and need to be handled accordingly.) But the blanket, realizing the



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danger the toaster was in, managed to slip underneath its old friend and cushion it from the worst shocks of the journey.

As they rode they could hear the radio in the front seat humming the poignant theme-song from *Dr. Zhivago*.

"Listen!" the Hoover hissed. "Of all possible songs to be singing, it has chosen one of the master's favorites. Already it has forgotten him!"

"Ah," said the toaster, "what choice does it have, poor thing? Once one of us had been turned on, would we have behaved any otherwise? Would you? Would I?"

The old vacuum groaned, and the radio went on playing its sad, sad song.

What graveyards are for people—horrible, creepy places that any reasonable individual tries to stay away from—the City Dump is for appliances and machines of every description. Imagine, therefore, what the appliances must have felt when they realized (the pirate had parked his pickup in front of high, ripply iron gates and was opening the padlock with a key from the ring that swung from his belt) that they had been brought to the City Dump! Imagine their horror as he drove the truck inside and they assimilated the terrible fact that he lived here! There, with smoke curling from a tin chimney, was his wretched shack—and all about it the most melancholy and fearsome sights the toaster had ever witnessed. Dismembered chassis of once-proud automobiles were heaped one atop the other to form veritable mountains of rusted iron. The asphalt-covered ground was everywhere strewn with twisted beams and blistered sheet metal, with broken and worn-out machine parts of all shapes and sizes—with all the terrible emblems, in short, of its own inevitable obsolescence. An appalling scene to behold—yet one that exercized a strange fascination over the toaster's mind. As often as it had heard of the City Dump, it had somehow never really believed in its existence. And now it was here, and nothing, not even the pirate's stony gaze, could prevent its shudder of fear and wonder.

The pirate got out of the truck and took the radio, along with his fishing rod and his day's catch, into the hovel where he lived. The appliances, left to themselves in the back of the truck, listened to the radio sing song after song with apparently indefatigable good cheer. Among them was the toaster's own favorite melody, "I Whistle a Happy Tune." The toaster was certain this couldn't be a coincidence. The radio was trying to tell its friends that if they were brave and patient and cheerful, matters would work out for the best. Anyhow, whether that was the radio's intention or just a program it had been tuned to, it was



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what the toaster firmly believed.

After he'd had his dinner the pirate came out of his shack to examine the other appliances. He fingered the Hoover's mudstained dustbag and the frayed part of its cord where it had been chewing on itself. He lifted the blanket and shook his head in mute deprecation. He looked inside the lamp's little hood and saw—which the lamp itself had not realized till now—that its tiny bulb was shattered. (It must have happened when the lamp had fallen off the office chair, just before they'd found the boat.)

Finally the pirate picked up the toaster—and made a scornful grimace. "Junk!" he said, depositing the toaster on a nearby scrap pile.

"Junk!" he repated, dealing with the lamp in a similar fashion.

"Junk!" He hurled the poor blanket over the projecting, broken axle of a '57 Ford.

"Junk!" He set the Hoover down on the asphalt with a shattering *thunk*.

"All of it, just junk." Having delivered this dismaying verdict, the pirate returned to his shack, where the radio had gone on singing in the liveliest manner all the while.

"Thank goodness," said the toaster aloud, as soon as he was gone.

"Thank goodness?" the Hoover echoed in stricken tones. "How can you say 'Thank goodness' when you've just been called junk and thrown on a heap of scrap?"

"Because if he'd decided to take us into his shack and use us, we'd have become his, like the radio. This way we've got a chance to escape."

The blanket, where it hung, limply, from the broken axle, began to whimper and whine. "No, no, it's true. That's all I am now—junk! Look at me—look at these tears, these snags, these stains. Junk! This is where I belong."

The lamp's grief was quieter but no less bitter. "Oh, my bulb," it murmered, "oh, my poor poor bulb!"

The Hoover groaned.

"Pull yourselves together, all of you!" said the toaster, in what it hoped was a tone of stern command. "There's nothing wrong with any of us that a bit of fixing-up won't put right. "You—" It addressed the blanket. "—are still fundamentally sound. Your coils haven't been hurt. After some sewing-up and a visit to the dry cleaner you'll be as good as new."

It turned to the lamp. "And what nonsense—to fuss over a broken bulb! You've broken your bulb before and probably will many times again. What do you think replaceable parts are *for?*"

Finally the toaster directed its attention to the vacuum cleaner. "And you? You, who must be our leader! Who ought to inspire us with your own greater strength! For *you* to sit there groaning and helpless! And just because some old pirate who lives in a dump makes an unflattering remark. Why, he probably doesn't even know



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how to *use* a vacuum cleaner—that's the sort of person *he* is!"

"Do you think so?" said the Hoover.

"Of course I do, and so would you if you'd be rational. Now, for goodness' sake, let's all sit down together and figure out how we're going to rescue the radio and escape from here."

By midnight it was amazing how much they'd managed to accomplish. The Hoover had recharged the rundown battery from the battery in the pirate's own truck. Meanwhile the lamp, in looking about for another doorway or gate than the one they'd come in by (there wasn't any), had discovered a vehicle even better suited to their needs than the office chair the pirate had thrown in the river. This was a large vinyl perambulator, which is another word for pram, which is also known, in the appliances' part of the world, as a baby buggy. By whatever name, it was in good working order—except for two minor faults. One fault was a squeak in the left front wheel, and the other was the way its folding visor was twisted out of shape so as to give the whole pram an air of lurching sideways when it was moving straight ahead. The squeak was fixed with a few drops of 3-in-1 Oil, but the visor resisted their most determined efforts to bend it back into true. But that didn't matter, after all. What mattered ws that it *worked*.

To think how many of the things consigned to this dump were still, like the pram (or themselves, for that matter) essentially serviceable! There were hair dryers and four-speed bicycles, water heaters and wind-up toys that would all have gone on working for years and years with just the slightest maintenance. Instead, they'd be sent to City Dump! You could hear their hopeless sighs and crazed murmurings rising from every dark mound round about, a ghastly medley that seemed to swell louder every moment as more and more of the forlorn, abandoned objects became conscious of the energetic new appliances in their midst.

"You will never, never, never get away," whispered a mad old cassette player in a cracked voice. "No, never! You will stay here like all the rest of us and rust and crack and turn to dust. And never get away."

"We will, though," said the toaster. "Just you wait and see."

But how? That was the problem the toaster had to solve without further delay.

Now the surest way to solve any problem is to think about it, and that's just what the toaster did. It thought with the kind of total, all-out effort you have to give to get a bolt off that's rusted onto a screw. At first the bolt won't budge, not the least bit, and the wrench may slip loose, and you begin to doubt that any amount of trying is going to accomplish your purpose. But you keep at it, and use a dab of solvent



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if there's any on hand, and eventually it starts to give. You're not even sure but you think so. And then, what do you know, it's off! You've done it! That's the way the toaster thought, and at last, because he thought so hard, he thought of a way they could escape from the pirate and rescue the radio at the same time.

"Now here's my plan," said the toaster to the other appliances, which had gathered round him in the darkest corner of the dump. "We'll *frighten* him, and that will make him run away, and when he's gone we'll go into his shack—"

"Oh, no, I *couldn't* do that," said the blanket with a shiver of dread.

"We'll go into his shack," the toaster insisted calmly, "and get the radio and put it inside the baby buggy and get in ourselves, all except the Hoover, of course, which will high-tail it out of this place just as fast as it can."

"But won't the gate be locked?" the lamp wanted to know. "It is now."

"No, because the pirate will have to unlock it to get out himself, and he'll be too frightened to remember to lock it behind him."

"It's a very good plan," said the Hoover, "but what I don't understand is—*how* are we going to frighten him?"

"Well, what are people afraid of the most?"

"Getting run over by a steam roller?" the Hoover guessed.

"No. Scarier than that."

"Moths?" suggested the blanket.

"No."

"The dark," declared the lamp with conviction.

"That's close," said the toaster. "They're afraid of ghosts."

"What are ghosts?" demanded the Hoover.

"Ghosts are people who are dead, only they're also sort of alive."

"Don't be silly," said the lamp. "Either they *are* dead or they aren't."

"Yes," the blanket agreed. "It's as simple as ON and OFF. If you're ON, you can't be OFF, and vice versa."

"*I* know that, and *you* know that, but people don't seem to. People say they know that ghosts don't exist but they're afraid of them anyhow."

"No one can be afraid of something that doesn't exist," the Hoover huffed.

"Don't ask me how they do it," said the toaster. "It's what they call a paradox. The point is this—people are afraid of ghosts. And so *we're* going to pretend to be one."

"How?" asked the Hoover skeptically.

"Let me show you. Stoop down. Lower. Wrap your cord around my cord. Now—lift me up..."

After an hour's practice of pretending to be a ghost, they decided they were ready. Carefully, so that the other appliances wouldn't fall off, the old Hoover trundled toward the window of the shack. The toaster, where it was balanced atop the handle of the vacuum, was just able to see inside.



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There on a table between a stack of unwashed dishes and the pirate's ring of keys was the poor captive radio, and there, in dirty striped pajamas, getting ready to go to bed, was the pirate.

"Ready?" the toaster whispered.

The blanket, which was draped over the vacuum in a roughly ghostlike shape with a kind of hood at the top through which the toaster was able to peer out, adjusted its folds one last time. "Ready," the blanket replied.

"Ready?" the toaster asked again.

For just a moment the lamp, where it was hidden halfway down the handle of the Hoover, turned itself on and then, quickly, off. The bulb it had taken from the socket in the ceiling of the pickup truck had only half the wattage it was used to, and so its beam of light was noticeably dimmer—just enough to make the blanket give off the faintest yellowish glow.

"Then let's start haunting," said the toaster.

That was the signal the Hoover had been waiting for.

"Whoo!" groaned the Hoover in its deepest, most quivery voice. "Whoo!"

The pirate looked up with alarm. "Who's there?" he demanded.

"Whoo—oo!" the Hoover continued.

"Whoever you are, you'd better go away."

"Whoo—oo—oo!"

Cautiously the pirate approached the window from which the groaning seemed to issue.

Upon receiving a secret electric signal from the toaster, the vacuum crept quietly alongside the shack to where they would be out of sight from the window.

"Whoo..." breathed the Hoover in the barest of whispers. "Whoo... Whoo—oo..."

"Who's out there?" the pirate demanded, pressing his nose against the pane of glass and peering into the outer darkness. "You'd better answer me. Do you hear?"

In answer the Hoover made a strangling, gurgling, gaspy sound that sounded frightening even if you knew it was only the Hoover doing it. By now the pirate, who didn't have any idea what this mysterious groaning might be, had got into a considerable state of nerves. When you live all alone in the City Dump you don't expect to hear strange noises just outside your window in the middle of the night. And if you were also a bit superstitious, as pirates tend to be....

"All right then—if you won't say who you are, I'm going to come out there and find out!" He lingered yet a while before the window, but at last, when no reply was forthcoming, the pirate pulled on his pants and then got into his boots. "I'm warning you!" he called out, though not in a tone that could be called threatening.

Still there was no reply. He took up his key ring from where it lay on the table beside the radio. He went to the door.



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He opened it.

"Now!" said the toaster, signaling secretly to the blanket along its electric cord.

"I can't," said the blanket, all atremble. "I'm too afraid."

"You *must!*"

"I mustn't: it's against the rules."

"We discussed all that before, and you *promised.* Now hurry—before he gets here!"

With a shudder of trepidation the blanket did as it was bidden. There was a rent in its side where it had been pierced by a branch on the night it was blown up into the tree. The lamp was hiding just behind this rent. As the pirate appeared around the corner of the shack, the blanket twitched the torn fabric aside.

The pirate stopped short in his tracks when he saw the shrouded figure before him.

"Whoo-oo!" groaned the Hoover one last time.

At this cue the lamp turned itself on. Its beam slanted up through the hole in the blanket right into the pirate's face.

When the lamp lit up, the pirate stared at the figure before him with the utmost horror. What he saw that was so frightening was the same thing the daisy had seen, the same thing Harold and Marjorie had seen, as well—he saw his own features reflected in the toaster's mottled chrome. And as he had been a very wicked person from his earliest youth, his face had taken on that special kind of ugliness that only very evil people's faces acquire. Seeing such a face grimacing at him from this strange hooded figure, what was the pirate to suppose but that he had come upon the most dangerous kind of ghost, the kind that understands exactly who we are and knows all the wrong things we've done and intends to punish us for them. From such ghosts even grown-up pirates will flee in terror. Which is exactly what the pirate did.

As soon as he was gone, the appliances rushed into the pirate's shack and rescued the joyful radio. Then before the pirate could return they scrambled into the baby buggy, and the old Hoover drove off with them as fast as its wheels would revolve.

As luck would have it, they didn't have much farther to go: where the master lived on Newton Avenue was only a mile or so from City Dump. They reached his apartment building early in the morning before a single milk truck had appeared on the street.

"You see," said the toaster cheerfully, "in the end everything really does work out for the best."

Alas, the toaster had spoken too soon. Their tribulations were not yet at an end, and not everything would work out for the best, as they were shortly to discover.

The Hoover, which had an instinctive knack for such things, buzzed the



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street door open and summoned the automatic elevator. When the elevator door slid open, it wheeled the pram in and pressed the button for the 14th floor.

"It's *changed* so," said the tensor lamp, as the Hoover pushed the pram out of the elevator and down the corridor. "The wallpaper used to be green squiggles and white blobs, and now it's crisscross lines."

"It's we who've changed," said the blanket miserably.

"Hush," said the Hoover sternly. "Remember the rules!" It pressed the doorbell beside the door to the master's apartment.

All the appliances kept perfectly still.

No one came to the door.

"Maybe he's asleep," said the alarm clock/radio.

"Maybe he's not home," said the Hoover. "I'll see." It rang the doorbell again, but in a different way so that only the appliances in the apartment would be able to hear it ring.

In only a moment a Singer sewing machine answered the door. "Yes?" said the sewing machine in a tone of polite curiosity. "Can I help you?"

"Oh, excuse me, I seem to have made a mistake." The Hoover looked at the number on the door, then at the name on the brass panel over the bell. It was the right number, the right name. But...a sewing machine?

"Is that...?" said a familiar voice within the apartment. "Why, it is! It's the old Hoover! How *are* you? Come in! Come in!"

The Hoover wheeled the pram into the apartment and over the deep-piled carpet toward the friendly old tv.

The blanket peeked out shyly over the side of the pram.

"And who's that with you? Come out—don't be shy. My goodness, what a treat this is."

The blanket crawled out of the pram, taking care to keep the worst effects of the journey folded up out of sight. It was followed by the radio, the lamp, and, last of all, the toaster.

The tv, which knew all five of them from the time it had spent with the master at the summer cottage, introduced them to the many appliances from all over the apartment which had begun to gather in the living room. Some, like the water pic, the blender, and the tv itself, were old friends. Some, like the stereo and the clock on the mantel, were known to the four appliances that had lived in the apartment at one time themselves but not to the toaster. But a great many were complete strangers to them all. There were huge impractical ginger-jar lamps squatting on low tables and, out of the bedroom, dim little lamps with frilly shades and other lamps screwed into the dining-nook wall that were pretending to be candleflames. Out of the kitchen had trooped a whole tribe of unfamiliar gadgets: a crockpot, a can opener, a waffle iron, a meat grinder, a carving knife, and, somewhat abash-



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edly, the master's new toaster.

"How do you do," said the new toaster in a barely audible voice when the tv introduced it.

"How do *you* do?" the toaster replied warmly.

Neither could think of anything else to say. Fortunately there were more introductions to be effected. The Hoover had to go through a similar ordeal when it met the apartment's vacuum cleaner, which was (just as the Hoover had feared) one of the new lightweight models that looks like a big hamburger bun on wheels. They were polite to each other, but it was obvious that the new vacuum looked on the Hoover as outmoded.

The blanket had an even worse shock in store. The last two appliances to appear in the living room were a vaporizer and a long tangled string of Christmas tree lights, both of which had been hibernating in a closet. The blanket looked about anxiously. "Well," it said, making a determined effort to seem accepting and friendly, "I think there must still be one more of you we haven't yet met."

"No," said the tv. "We're all here."

"But is there no other...blanket?"

The tv avoided the blanket's earnest gaze. "No. The master doesn't use an electric blanket any more. Just a plain wool one."

"But he always...he always...." The blanket could say no more. Its resolution deserted it and it fell in a heap on the carpet.

A gasp went up from the apartment's assembled appliances, which until now had had no idea of the extent of the blanket's injuries.

"Doesn't *use* an electric blanket!" the toaster repeated indignantly. "Whyever not?"

The screen of the tv flickered and then, evasively, started showing a gardening show.

"It isn't the master's choice, really," said the Singer sewing machine in its funny clipped accent. "I daresay *he* would be delighted to see his old blanket again."

The blanket looked up questioningly.

"It's the mistress," the sewing machine went on. "She says she becomes too hot under an electric blanket."

"The mistress?" the five appliances repeated.

"Didn't you know?"

"No," said the toaster. "No, we haven't heard anything from the master since he left the cottage three years ago."

"Two years, eleven months, and twenty-two days, to be precise," said the alarm clock/radio.

"That's why we determined to find our way here. We feared.... I don't know what exactly. But we thought that...that our master would need us."

"Oh," said the sewing machine. It turned to watch the gardening show on the tv.

As unobtrusively as it might, the



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new toaster crept back into the kitchen and resumed its post of duty on the formica countertop.

"Two years, eleven months, and twenty-two days is a long time to be left alone," the radio asserted at rather a loud volume. "Naturally we became concerned. The poor air conditioner stopped working altogether."

"And all the while," said the lamp, "never a word of explanation!" It glared reproachfully at the tv, which continued to discuss the problem of blister beetles.

"Can't *any* of you tell us why?" the toaster demanded earnestly. "Why did he never return to the cottage? There must be a *reason*."

"I can tell you," said the vaporizer, inching forward. "You see, the mistress is subject to hay fever. I can help her a bit with her asthma, but when the hay fever starts in on her, there's nothing anyone can do, and she is really very miserable then."

"I still don't understand," said the toaster.

The sewing machine spelled it out. "Rather than go to the country, where there is bound to be ragweed and pollen and such, they spend their summers at the seaside."

"And our cottage—our lovely cottage in the woods—what is to become of it?"

"I believe the master means to sell it."

"And...and us?" the toaster asked.

"I understand there is to be an auction," said the sewing machine.

The Hoover, which had comported itself with great dignity throughout the visit, could bear no more. With a loud groan it grasped the handle of the perambulator as though to steady itself. "Come," it gasped. "All of you, come. We are not wanted here. We'll return to...to...."

Where would they return? Where could they? They had become appliances without a household!

"To the Dump!" shrieked the blanket hysterically. "Isn't that where *junk* belongs? That's all we are now—junk!" It twisted its cord into an agonized knot. "Isn't that what the pirate said we were? Junk! Junk! Junk! All of us, and me most of all."

"Control yourself," said the toaster sternly, though its own coils felt as though they were about to snap. "We're *not* junk. We're sturdy, useful appliances."

"Look at me!" cried the blanket, displaying the full extent of its worst tear. "And these mudstains—look!"

"Your tears can be sewn up," said the toaster calmly. It turned to the sewing machine. "Can't they?"

The sewing machine nodded in mute agreement.

"And the stains can be cleaned."

"And then what?" the Hoover demanded dourly. "Let us suppose the blanket is repaired and cleaned, and that I've mended my cord and got my dustbag into working shape, and that you've polished yourself. Suppose all



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that—what then? Where shall we go?"

"I don't know. Somewhere. I'll have to think."

"Pardon me," said the tv, turning off the gardening show. "But didn't I hear you say something about a...pirate?"

"Yes," said the sewing machine nervously. "What pirate did you mean? There's not a pirate in this building, I hope?"

"Never fear—we don't have to worry any more about him. He captured us but we escaped from him. Would you like to know how?"

"Goodness, yes," said the tv. "I love a good story."

So all the appliances gathered in a circle about the toaster, which began to tell the story of their adventures from the moment they had decided to leave the cottage till the moment they arrived at the door of the apartment. It was a very long story, as you know, and while the toaster told it, the sewing machine set to work sewing up all the rips and tears in the blanket.

The next afternoon when the blanket came back from Jiffy Dry Cleaners on the other side of Newton Avenue, the apartment's appliances put on a splendid party for their five visitors. The Christmas tree lights strung themselves up between the two ginger-jar lamps and winked and bubbled in the merriest way, while the tv and the stereo sang duets from all the most famous musical comedies. The toaster was polished to a fare-thee-well, and the Hoover was likewise in fine fettle once again. But most wonderful of all—the blanket looked almost as good as new. Its yellow was possibly not as bright as it had been, but it was a lovely yellow, for all that. The exact same yellow, according to the tv, of custard and primroses and the nicest bathroom tissues.

At five o'clock the radio's alarm went off, and everyone became very still, except for the blanket, which went on whirling gaily about the living room for some time before it realized the music had stopped.

"What is it?" asked the blanket. "Why are you all so quiet?"

"Hush," said the radio. "It's time for *The Swap Shop.*"

"What is *The Swap Shop?*" asked the blanket.

"It's the program on listener-supported radio station KHOP," said the toaster excitedly, "that is going to find a new home for us! I told you not to worry, didn't I? I told you I'd think of something!"

"Be quiet," said the lamp. "It's starting."

The radio turned up its volume so that all the appliances in the living room could hear. "Good afternoon," it said, in a deep, announcer-type voice, "and welcome to *The Swap Shop.* Today's program opens with a very strange offering from Newton Avenue. It seems that someone there wants to



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swap—now listen to this list!—a Hoover vacuum cleaner, an AM alarm clock/radio, a yellow electric blanket, a tensor lamp, and a Sunbeam toaster. All this in exchange for...well, it says on the card here: 'You name it.' What's most important, I'm informed, is that you should have a real and genuine *need* for all five of these fine appliances, since their present owner wants them to be able to stay together. For sentimental reasons! Now I've heard everything! Anyhow, if you think you *need* those five appliances, the number to call is 485-9120. That number again, 485-9120. Our next offer is not quite so unusual. Seems there's a party on Center Street who is offering, absolutely for free, five lovable black-and-white—"

The radio tuned out KHOP. "Didn't he make us sound super!" it exclaimed, forgetting in its excitement to stop speaking in the announcer's voice.

"Come over here by the telephone," the Hoover urged the radio. "You'll have to talk to them. I'm just too nervous."

All five appliances gathered about the telephone and waited for it to ring.

There are two schools of thought about whether or not appliances ought to be allowed the free use of telephones. Some insist that it is flatly against the rules and should never be done in any circumstances, while others maintain that it's all right, since it is only another appliance one is talking to, in this case a telephone. Whether or not it's against the rules, it is certainly a fact that a good many appliances (lonely radios especially) do use the phone system regularly, usually to contact other appliances. This explains the great number of so-called "wrong numbers" that people get at odd times. Computerized exchanges could never make so many mistakes, though they end up taking the blame.

For the last three years, of course, this issue had not mattered very much to the appliances, since the phone in the cottage had been disconnected. Ordinarily, the Hoover would probably have opposed the notion of any of them using the phone, as it did tend to adopt the conservative attitude. But first there had been the absolute necessity of calling Jiffy Dry Cleaners and having them pick up the blanket, and that had established a clear precedent for their phoning in to KHOP and offering themselves on *The Swap Shop*. And now here they were all gathered round the telephone, waiting to talk with their next master!

The phone rang.

"Now whatever you do," warned the Hoover, "don't say yes to the first person who happens to call. Find out something about him first. We don't want to go just anywhere, you know."

"Right," said the radio.

"And remember," said the toaster, "to be nice."

The radio nodded. It picked up the telephone receiver. "Hello?" it said.

"Is this the person with the five ap-



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pliances?"

"It is! Oh my goodness yes indeed, it is!"

And so the five appliances went to live with their new mistress, for as it happened it was a woman who'd phoned them first and not a man. She was an elderly, impoverished ballerina who lived all alone in a small room at the back of her ballet studio on Center Street in the oldest part of the city. What the ballerina had swapped for the appliances were her five lovable black-and-white kittens. The appliances' former master never could figure out how, upon returning with his wife from their summer vacation by the sea, there had come to be five kittens in their apartment. It was rather an awkward situation, for his wife was allergic to cat fur. But they were such darlings—it would never have done to put them out on the street. In the end they decided to keep them, and his wife simply took more antihistamines.

And the appliances?

Oh, they were *very* happy. At first the Hoover had been doubtful about entering service with a woman (for it had never worked for a woman before, and it was somewhat set in its ways), but as soon as it realized what a fastidious and immaculate housekeeper its mistress was, it forgot all its reservations and became her greatest champion.

It felt so good to be *useful* again! The radio would play beautiful classical music for the ballerina to dance to; and when she became tired and wanted to sit down and read, the lamp would light her book; and then when it grew late and she'd finished her book, the blanket would give off a steady, gentle warmth that kept her cozy all through the long, cold night.

And when it was morning and she awoke, what wonderful slices of toast the toaster would toast for her—so brown and crisp and perfect and always just the same!

And so the five appliances lived and worked, happy and fulfilled, serving their dear mistress and enjoying each other's companionship, to the end of their days.

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## Coming next month

**September's feature story is an absolutely fresh and colorful and entertaining after-the-holocaust novella by Felix Gotschalk titled AMONG THE CLIFF DWELLERS OF THE SAN ANDREAS CANYON. Watch for the September issue, on sale July 31.**



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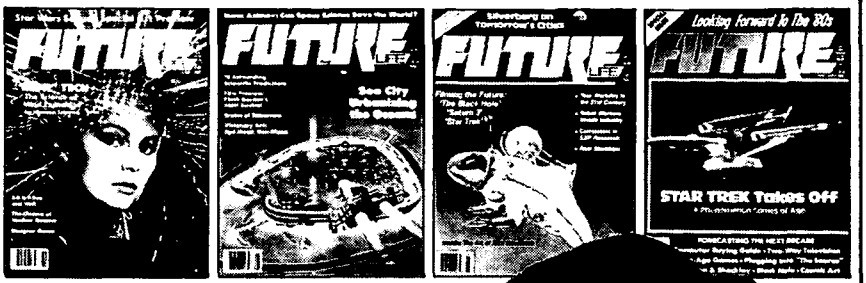


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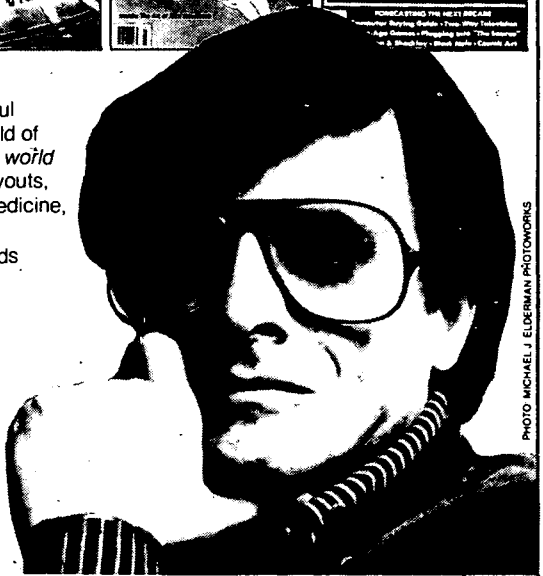

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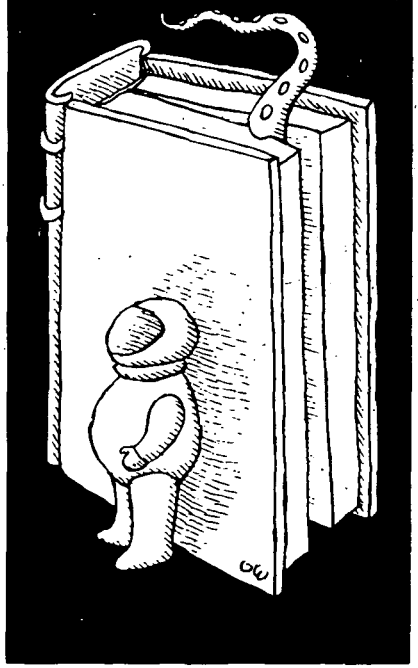
# Books

## ALGIS BUDRYS



*A Reader's Guide to Science Fiction*, Baird Searles, *et al.* Avon, $2.95

*Who Goes There*, a Bibliographic Dictionary of Pseudonymous Literature in the Fields of Fantasy and Science Fiction. James A. Rock, Ed. James A. Rock & Co., P.O. Box 1431, Bloomington, IN 47402. $23.95 cloth, $10.95 paper

*The Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, Peter Nicholls, General Editor. Doubleday Dolphin, $12.95

As others have pointed out, the problem with doing a history of SF is that most of the pivotal characters are still alive. They have articulate memories. They were members of a viciously oppressed minority, and such societies generate a large savings fund of oral tradition astonishing for its depth of detail, some of which may even be accurate and all of which has the verisimilitude that decades of recounting by professional storytellers have brought to it. To the young researcher, those days are a topic. To people still in a position to comment on the research, those days were tears and laughter.

So while it's possible to produce an "encyclopedia" of SF which seems to cover the topic well enough, and appears plausible to outsiders, it's not possible to produce one that will go unchallenged. And it will be challenged, often enough, by the very persons it has imbued with major importance, citing chapter and verse from memory ... and only from memory. The fact is that it's often a memory based not on



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actual personal experience but on personal experience of hearing a fresh bit of gossip.

Such a source as W—, for instance, unimpeachable in his credentials, tells us the story of how the young and virginal A— was pushed up the whorehouse steps kicking and screaming, to emerge in a half hour, pale and wide-eyed, stammering "No teeth! No teeth!" Was W— among those older boon companions waiting for the results? Well, no, but he heard it the following day from someone who was. Does the incident appear in A—'s own memoirs? It does not. There is instead another rite-of-passage anecdote, very similar in tone but utterly different in circumstance. Third party F—, however, is present in both versions. So we ask F— for the truth of the matter, and he says: "Look, these days I have lunch with A— at the Utter Respectables Club every month." Then he chuckles and grins. "But let me tell you about S— and the divorcee on the Staten Island ferry in 1941. You ever notice how he began writing a lot about tall blue-eyed brunettes right about that time, but always marries short blondes?"

"You mean you were right there in the lifeboat with them?"

"No, but her ex-husband told me all about it."

And so on.

The tradition tells us in similar ways of what someone like Campbell said to someone like George O. Smith about the chemistry of alcohol and what that led to, of why "Ray-Blasters of the Second Moon" appeared in *Cometary Tales* when it had been sold to *Ether Stories*, of exactly how C—'s byline came to occur on a story written by his then-wife. Who knows what actually happened? But many of us know the agreed-on version, and some of us do not hesitate to righteously disparage any researcher who tells it differently.

This leads to difficulties not only for the researcher but for the reviewer. How can I explain to you why I think that Brian Ash's 1976 *Who's Who in Science Fiction* is not trustworthy, despite the perspicacity of many passages, and why I think the now-venerable Tuck *Encyclopedia* (Advent: Publishers, Chicago) is generally reliable despite the many solid cavils that have been directed against it? It's a matter of weighing a hundred factors — of cross-checking a store of anecdotes for mutual corroborations, of assessing the probity of the man who told me the tale.*

There is, for instance, one practicing writer today whose reputation rests essentially on one story. He's a nice guy, writes an acceptable column-inch, sometimes tackles major topics, all of which he muffs slightly. His stature

**Without significant exception, the gossip of American SF's early days is retailed solely by the men. The women smile or change the subject, even when it's of considerable literary significance.*



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in the field is sustained by a feeling that *next* time he might display the clarity of logic which made a blockbuster and a classic out of the ending of that one piece, now thirty years past.

I heard from the mouth of his own editor that the famous ending had to be forced on the author, who urgently wanted to say exactly the opposite thing. And I believe that editor, because I knew when and how that editor lied, and this wasn't one of the ways.

I downgrade any researcher who discusses the subject author with overwhelming enthusiasm; it seems to me that the record of the years proves beyond doubt that the man, whatever other gifts he has, lacks the touch of brightness. But to tell you the truth, I can't be sure whether I'm really looking at the body of the rest of that writer's work with any sort of objectivity, or whether I'm hopelessly prejudiced by being so much aware of what I'm ready to swear are the facts regarding the pivotal story. That story encouraged a greater degree of realism in SF plotting: its influence is real, its ripples have been spreading throughout the SF writing community for three decades. Where is the exact truth, the genuine justice? And a hundred years from now, just how much will that matter?

So I fall back, as I must, on the Budrys test. *After* I have compared the book's listed facts to what facts I remember being told, after I check the usefulness and accessibility of the material embodying the facts, I have to rely for a final judgment on the treatment of material dealing with me and with incidents in which I participated.

The Ash *Who's Who* failed the test. I was not born in Prussia; I was born in East Prussia, a historically different thing which any scholar can check with a flip of the appropriate *Britannica* page on German history. There was no Lithuanian Government in Exile for my father to represent in 1936, and, obviously, no need for one since the Soviet occupation did not occur until 1940 — at which time there wasn't any government in exile, either, and never has been. What my father was was Consul General of Lithuania in New York City from 1936-1964, the U.S. never having recognized the Soviet takeover. He brought our family here in flight from Nazi practices. He had failed to wangle the Lithuanian foreign ministry into transferring him from Konigsberg to his first preference, Paris. Which is why I don't write in French and didn't spend World War II hiding in an attic.

Now — these are corrections of casual mis-statements made by an English researcher who ought to have immediately seen that his construct made no sense in terms of the dates of World War II, and who ought to at least have seen a need to dig a little deeper into it, granting me sufficient importance to be included at all. What am I to make, then, of the likelihood that Ash has the essential facts straight on, for example,



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Lester del Rey of St. Charles, Minnesota? Or — since I know he has them slightly cockeyed because I was Lester's apprentice for nine months in 1953 — how about R.A. Lafferty, or Ray Cummings, or Everett B. Cole, none of whom I do know at all well?

So I never reviewed the Ash book when it appeared, which is one way I have of dealing with books I don't like, and I wouldn't bring it up now except it's germane to the topic. And, besides, I see that dumb entry quoted on the flyleaves of all the British editions of my books, and am sick of it.

So with all that in mind, and keeping in mind all the permutations involved when you try to enclose truth between endpapers, let's look at *A Reader's Guide to Science Fiction* and several other recent reference books which I think *are* worth reviewing.

Baird Searles — that fellow over in that other column — and his collaborators, Martin Last, Beth Meacham and Michael Franklin, have done a notably useful and pleasant thing. *A Reader's Guide* is something the field needs badly; the great majority of today's SF readers and nearly all of its librarians are novices. We're fortunate that this editorial team has not only done the job but done it so well.

The book falls into seven parts; an introduction by Samuel R. Delany, one of the field's most respected critical writers; an editorial introduction explaining how to use the book; then, alphabetically by author, a comprehensive set of short literary biographies listing major works and themes; then, a guide to series, a guide to award winners, a guide to a basic SF library, and an unsigned historical essay.

This is, "of course," exactly the way to have done this sort of book; of course, that is, now that it's been done this way and can be seen to work.

The biographies take up the bulk of the contents. They run from Mark Adlard, Alan Burt Akers and Brian Aldiss and on out through Wylie, Wyndham, Zebrowski and Zelazny. (You'll note that the entry is for Wyndham, not for John Beynon Harris, of whom most novices have never heard except under the far better known pseudonym).

The approach is judgmental, opinionated, and enthusiastic. ("Michael Moorcock is unquestionably the most varied and prolific of s-f authors." "EDMOND HAMILTON. Zap! Bam! Baroom!") And it finds peculiar correlations: "If you like Budrys, try the work of Piers Anthony." But it passes the Budrys test; there is no question of which statements are intended to be taken as fact and in truth appear factual as far as the Budrys test can determine,* and which are recommendations and judgments. It happens I disagree with many of the opinions, and

**I'm not an officer in the Lithuanian army. But for a while it was useful to be one, and I can't fault anyone who's not up on current immigrant politics.*



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very probably you will too, but they are honest opinions, formed on a base of many years' familiarity with the field, and deserve consideration. One might even find oneself revising a long-cherished notion or two.

So, despite the fact that it confuses Philip Klass with Philip J. Klass, I cannot think of a single better book to hand the local librarian or the cousin who has just graduated from *Star Trek*. It points you in the direction of a fascinating territory, and then gives you your head.

*Who Goes There* is a compilation of pseudonyms in SF literature, and a very comprehensive one. The main section is alphabetical by real name, but an index does refer out from the pseudonymous bylines. I'd rather see it the other way around, maybe, but I can appreciate the difficulties that might cause.

How does it do on the Budrys test? 8 on a scale of 10. It calls me a naturalized American citizen, for some reason, when in fact, at the age of 49, I'm the youngest Free Lithuanian citizen in the world, and clinging to it. But it spells my real name right, and it doesn't insert a "J." in Algis Budrys. It misses a slew of my pen names from the days when I was writing "Love-Starved Arabs Raped me Often" and "I Shot Down Castro's China-Commie Air Force," which is O.K. with me, and it includes one pen-name I never used on professional SF. It calls "Fire-god," a story in the back pages of *Rocket Stories*, "Fire God."

It also calls Lester del Rey the editor of Ballantine's science fiction line; last time I looked, that was Judy-Lynn del Rey, with Les as the fantasy editor, and assuredly Judy-Lynn was the first cause of the del Rey imprint. Etc. But for the purposes of this book, which updates and centralizes information hitherto not readily accessible, the errors tend to lie in peripheral areas while the core data are solid. There have been other such compilations, and there will have to be fresh ones in the future, but for those who have to know these things, or want to get further along the track started by perusing the *Reader's Guide*, this is the book to get now.

Peter Nicholls' *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, not to be confused with what seems a score of similarly named productions, is vastly thick, set up like an encyclopedia, with narrow columns, many photographs and art spots, intertwined cross-references, thematic headings, and minutiae such as the dates on which stories were republished in expanded or variant versions. I have to say that it's probably going to be the best there is for some time, because the labor involved in attempting to supersede it would be enormous.

It has in it everything one would expect of an encyclopedia except an index, and an index would be redundant.



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so thickly sown are the cross-references. You can start anywhere, and if you follow the references will find yourself eventually reading the entire book.

Budrys test: It picks up the "government-in-exile representative" tag from Ash, which immediately makes it a little suspect in my eyes; Ash is not listed as one of the contributing editors, of whom there are a mort, but obviously John Clute, who wrote the article on me, used the Ash as a reference. It also claims my last name is a shortening; it's not. It's my father's *nom de guerre* and means, approximately, "Sentry," hence "John A. Sentry" in *Who Goes There*. The Lithuanian original is Polovinskas, but I was baptized Budrys, having been born some years after my father legally changed his name. In any event, that's a brand new piece of unsubstantiated speculation, apparently original with this reference, which I expect to see faithfully repeated elsewhere in future references.

There is also a tendency less harmless than Searles's cheerful opinions. Clute describes as a "weakness" a tendency on my part to make "genre themes carry mainstream resonances." Apart from the merits of that argument — which is what that is, rather than a judgment — it implicitly stands up SF as a "genre" *and nothing more*. That is an extremely serious assumption, which I note is shared by a number of British critics and encyclopedists, all of which thus undercut the essential validity of their own researches as being anything more than moves in some of less-than-important game.

That's the kind of rock-in-the-tapioca that can really bring thoughtful rumination to a startled halt. Nor does it appear only in the reference to me. As one tours the volume, there are often asides and entire articles which appear inexplicably frivolous — do we need an entry on *Bug!* the utterly forgettable 1975 film, for any purpose except to juxtapose a photo of a girl with a beetle in her eye?

So, does it fail the Budrys test? No, because nothing this large could possibly be free of error, and the degree of actual error detected is not serious. Does it arouse the Budrys ire? It will assuredly influence the tone and nature of the articles on SF I'm writing for various university presses, because SF is neither a genre nor a game for children. Does Budrys hope for a better encyclopedia? You betcha. Does he endorse this one? Under the perception that this is the best available current compilation of relevant facts, that it is far fresher than the Tuck, and that most readers have minds of their own with which to process the text for inconsistencies and paradoxes, yes, this is, as I said, the book to go to. Sometimes details in themselves are more effective than literal truth, as SF anecdotalists long ago discovered.

But, as my friend Galileo once muttered under his breath, *eppur se muove*.



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*This engaging story (one of a series) about the Mayor of a Maine town and his inventive buddy Howie is from a 36-year-old resident of Belfast, Maine. Mr. Easton writes that he went to high school and college in Maine, went to Chicago for grad school and a Ph.D. in theoretical biology. He worked as a textbook editor, has been a full time free lance writer since 1976, and is currently a contributing editor to* Biology Digest *and a book columnist for* Analog.

# Gambling Man

BY

## THOMAS A. EASTON

Howie Wyman had been known to tinker. He had a shop in his barn where his deft fingers, so knobby you wondered how he bent them, could fix a washing machine or a chain saw, build a motorbike or a chest of drawers. Could, I say, and did, too, at times. More often, he just fiddled around with assorted parts, piecing them together, taking them apart, winding up with contraptions that whirled and buzzed and blinked. One of them once earned him a blue ribbon in the Waldo County Regional Arts and Crafts Show. Kinetic sculpture, the judges called it.

But this story isn't about Howie's lone attempt at art. Not that he was trying to make art. He thought he'd built something that would keep the starlings out of his strawberry patch. It worked, too, until Betty Hawkins, our librarian, spotted it and insisted he loan it to her for the show. She was hard to refuse.

This story *is* about something else Howie put together one day. What makes it a story is that Howie's damned tinkering brought the Mafia—the Cosa Nostra, the Syndicate, the Black Hand, whatever you call it, the folks who run most of the gambling in this country—to our town. It brought a junior godfather, a skinny fellow in tailored brown, elevator shoes, and a shiny Lotus. He had buck teeth and a receding hairline, and he didn't look like a rat. Far from it. For one thing, he didn't have a tail. For another, his nose was too broad. And his ears weren't pointed.

His name was Vincent Conant. Bonny showed him into my townhall office, he took a seat, and when she had closed the door behind her, he said, "Mayor Bowen."

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I inclined my head. That was what strangers called me. Friends called me Harry. "What can I do for you?" I asked.

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he reached into the breast pocket of his jacket, extracted a small, cream-colored card, and handed it across my desk. I accepted it. My fingers told me the printing was embossed. I read it. It gave his name and said he was the representative of something called "Counterchance." I must have looked perplexed, for he then said, "I am a consultant. To the gambling industry."

Ah. Now I knew. I carefully refrained from looking at the TV set on the bookshelf to the left of the door. I had wondered how long our luck would last, how long we could keep getting away with it. "And?"

He crossed his legs and plucked at his trousers. He glanced out the room's one window behind me, toward the firehouse across the street, at the color of the trees beyond. He sniffed as if the view didn't suit him. "I have been asked to find an explanation for your extreme good fortune," he said. He paused. "And to stop it."

"Ayuh," I said. I picked up the pipe I had set aside when Bonny knocked. I tamped the ashes down and lit it. I blew a cloud of smoke over Conant's head. "But you can't stop luck. You have to wait for it to turn. It always does."

He stared at me. No, he wasn't a rat. His eyes seemed more reptilian at the moment. "Usually," he agreed. "But for the past six weeks, you have been placing bets on horse races, football games, anything my clients offered odds on. And you have not lost once. It is as if you had access to tomorrow's papers."

I laughed, still not looking at the TV set. "You or your bosses have been smoking the wrong stuff. I'm just lucky."

He didn't buy it. He stood up, set his hands on the edge of my desk, and looked down at me. I had to lean back in my chair to meet his eyes. "You have cost us too much," he said. "You have a system. I want it. I will have it."

I laughed again. I wanted him to think I didn't find him threatening at all. But the laugh was a lie. His threat was real, if implied, and I was suddenly aware of my guts. It wasn't a pleasant feeling. I repeated the only secret I intended anyone besides Howie or Bonny to share. "I'm just lucky."

He stared down at me for another minute. "Sure," he said. He straightened, turned toward the door, turned back, and said, "You will not be able to place any more bets, of course." He turned again and left.

I was glad to see him go, glad to be able to look at the TV set that—had he but known it!—had brought him here. A moment later, Bonny came in, closed the door, and leaned against it. I shifted my gaze to her. My Bonny. My secretary, my fiancee. Intelligent, sym-



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pathetic eyes; short, dark hair; an armful of a figure. I had loved to look at her since the day I'd hired her. I still did, all the more because I now knew what her light-blue pants suit concealed.

She broke the silence with, "He sounded like Mafia."

I nodded. What secretary doesn't listen in when she can?

"It's not good, Harry. That bunch'd do anything to get their hands on the thing."

We both looked at the TV set. I agreed, but.... "When it comes right down to it," I said, "I'd rather they got it than the government or the insurance companies."

"I suppose." The TV didn't look like anything special. And it wasn't, really. Howie hadn't modified the TV at all. But the antenna leads went to an old hifi amplifier with one tube burned out. The amplifier in turn was hooked to an antenna Howie had concocted. *That* was what was special.

Last April, when the ice had been too soft for ice fishing and the water in the brooks had been too high for the trout to bite, when nobody had had any odd jobs for him, Howie had spent a day in the town library. Emma had had it in for him, as usual, and he had felt that anything was preferable to staying home.

Anyway, he'd been leafing through back issues of *Scientific American* and found an "Amateur Scientist" column that said how to build an electric furnace. He built the thing, and by June he was able to use it to coat young raspberry stems with vaporized aluminum. He got the stems out with acid, wired up the resulting prickly tubes, and built a TV antenna. From a distance, it looked normal; the fuzz of tiny thorns that covered the thing was invisible. But Howie thought that fuzz should let his TV pick up short wavelength radiation as well as microwaves. He plugged the amplifier into the circuit just in case the new signals weren't too strong.

I was there in his shop the day he tried it out. He flipped the switch, we waited a minute, and the screen lit up. But what it showed didn't look like any TV show I'd ever seen. The picture was the same on all channels, and it looked for all the world like the middle of our town, though distorted by a shimmer like a heat haze. There wasn't any sound.

We fiddled with the knobs on the TV and the amplifier until the picture became a mite clearer. At the same time, we discovered we could make the picture move, as if the camera were being carried down the street. We brought the view right up to the townhall, found that we could steer it through the wall, and stopped it when we could see an office calendar. The date was two days away. A clock told us it was just over fifty hours off.

And that was what we had. Not only a camera-less TV, but a time-watcher, a time-spy, as well. Bonny



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took two steps, flicked it on, and played with the knobs to make the picture scan across town. We noticed the cloud of smoke simultaneously. She veered her scan path, tracked it down, and I said, "The Jackson house." Flames were breaking through the roof beside the chimney. "Call Bryant," I said. He was the fire chief. "Ask him to get a chimney-cleaning crew out there today." He would listen. We had made enough such requests lately, both of him and of the town's police. The statistics were down, way down, and I knew we were saving people grief. But I wondered what the effect would be if this were done on a larger scale. That it was worth it here and now, I knew even as I spoke to Bonny. The picture changed, the flames and smoke fading to a shadow.

It hadn't taken us long to figure out what the fuzziness in the picture meant. Perhaps my previous exploits had helped, though Bonny had been the one to make the suggestion, and she'd had only hearsay to go on. The picture was a double—multiple—exposure, showing all the possible futures, shaded according to their probability. Nothing was certain unless the picture was clear, and even then the picture could change between now and then.

Bonny was back at the controls again, the phone call finished. Scanning, scanning, coming back to the townhall and the conference room down the hall from my office. She centered on the long table. its top was bare. So we were taking Conant seriously. I supposed we had to. But it was a shame. For more than six weeks now, we had been covering that table with the sports pages so we could read the headlines in advance. The fine print of the text was virtually invisible to us. Word choice was too arbitrary, too improbable, to give us more than a blur. We had some of the same problem with the headlines, of course, but then we only bet when the news was unmistakably clear.

Bonny turned the TV off and crossed the room toward me. She hitched her fanny up onto the corner of my desk, kicked off one shoe, and rested a foot on my thigh. "I wish Howie had left you out of this one," she said. She looked troubled.

I slid a hand up the leg of her pants suit and stroked her calf. I shrugged. "You know Emma. I don't think he wanted it anywhere she might get her hands on it. She tries to keep him on a short rein as it is."

She wiggled her toes. "I guess it's safe enough here. But shouldn't you tell him about Conant?"

I nodded and picked up my pipe again. "I would if I knew where he was."

I didn't have to worry long about finding Howie. He found me. He showed up in the office the very next day, looking as disreputable as ever in worn boots, dirty overalls, and a



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checked shirt. His shaggy, greying hair stuck out under the brim of a floppy green felt hat. His cheek bulged with the usual wad of tobacco, and as soon as he entered the room, I toed my metal wastebasket out from under my desk. He spat, making a nasty noise, half clang and half rustle.

Bonny followed him in to listen while I told him about Conant. His reaction only proved I didn't understand him perfectly, for all the years I'd known him. I'd expected him to get mad—in as few words as humanly possible, perhaps—but he only looked disgusted. "So that explains it," he said, and he spat again.

"Explains what?" I asked.

"Burgulars," he said. "Last night. Didn't take anythin', but Emma's madder'n hell."

I could imagine. So could Bonny, from the look on her face. "I told you he was a crook," she said.

I waved a hand. "Of course he is." What else could he be, after all? "But what now? Will be break into my house? Yours, Bonny? Here?"

"All of 'em," said Howie.

"Huh!" Bonny spun on a heel and turned to the TV. She yanked it half off its shelf and reached behind it. She disconnected the leads to the amplifier and then unhooked the amplifier from the antenna, which we had mounted in the townhall attic, amidst the cobwebs, dust, and old files. "He won't find anything here," she said.

Howie nodded. I agreed. It was best to hide the evidence, to make the TV just a TV, the amplifier just a broken-tubed shelf ornament. But still, I regretted it.

"Besides," said Bonny. "We don't really need it anymore. We all have plenty of money now."

Sure.

Howie got out of his chair. "Ayuh," he said. "S'pose we do. I'm goin' birdin'."

I envied him. It was fall, the air was crisp and tangy, the woods and fields were brilliant. And the partridge were out there, ready to burst into flight like a bolt—not of lightning, they weren't that fast; but of thunder, they were that noisy—and fall to shotgun blasts. But I was mayor of our town, unpaid but devoted to the job, the voters all agreed. I had my oil business as well, and that took all the time I could give it, now that the cold weather was coming. I would be lucky to go hunting once that fall. Not Howie, though. He could go when he liked, for as long as he liked. He was limited only by the need he felt to earn just enough money to keep Emma at home. Usually, that meant plowing driveways, painting houses, haying, cutting wood, and the like. But not now. He could go for a year on his share of the betting.

I didn't see Howie again for another week, and nothing remarkable happened while he was gone, unless you count the turkey someone tethered to the church bell clapper. I tended to the



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affairs of my two offices, undisturbed by Conant or anything relating to him. Bonny kept me company at the town-hall and at home. She was almost ready to move in with me. In fact, her own house wasn't much more than a mail drop now.

We had just finished supper and were lingering over our coffee, talking, when Howie showed up at the kitchen door. I hadn't heard him drive in, and when I went to the door I didn't see his pickup in the driveway. Then I looked at him through the screen. I stopped wondering about the truck. He was a mess. He stank. There were saddle bags under his eyes. His face was bruised. His hat was missing. And his shirt was torn.

I let him in. His first words were, "Never did get to go huntin'."

I grabbed him by one elbow as he staggered. "What happened?"

Bonny came up behind me. "Good Lord, Howie!" She caught the other elbow. Together we led him to the table and plunked him down. She went to the sink to wet a dish towel. I reached for the jug in the cupboard over the fridge.

We got the story out of him while he sipped whiskey between swipes of the towel. It seemed he hadn't been a mile out of town on the old county road when two characters in a Landrover ran him off the road, waved guns at him, and hauled him off to an old camp in the woods. He thought it was the Peterson camp.

They had tied him to a bunk frame, standing up. They had beat him with fists and pieces of hose. They had quizzed him: "How do you read the future?" "What's the secret?" "How do you read the future?" over and over again. And they hadn't let him sleep, except for catnaps, for a week.

But it hadn't worked. I could have told them that. Howie wasn't very ambitious, but he was a tough old bird. He never said anything he didn't want to say, and you couldn't change his mind with dynamite. Eventually, they had seen that. A third man had appeared, Conant by the description. He had taken a long look at Howie and said, "Turn him loose." The others obeyed, though they drove deeper into the woods before they threw him into the bushes, still tied.

Howie hadn't stopped to sleep before working his bonds loose and hoofing the ten miles back to town. Now he was ready to drop, as soon as we would let him. I stripped his clothes off—his captors hadn't let him loose for anything—and got him into the tub, scrubbed him down, and tumbled him into my bed. Tough as he was, I expected him to sleep till noon. Bonny and I could bunk on the couch.

When I returned to the kitchen, Bonny was holding Howie's clothes at arm's length. "Should we burn these?"

I shook my head. "We can soak 'em in a bucket outdoors. I'll do it if you'll get the coffee going again."

It was another twenty minutes be-



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fore we could sit down once more. It took that long to hose the worst of the filth off Howie's clothes and change my own outfit. I'd rubbed a bit too close to my old friend for comfort.

By then the coffee was ready and poured. I topped the cups with a splash of brandy, and we both sighed. I said, "I hadn't thought it would come to this."

"But that's who we're dealing with," said Bonny. "Animals! We can't just stop betting."

I nodded glumly and sipped the coffee.

"We have to do something!"

"Like what?" I felt almost as tired as Howie had looked.

"Convince them there's no secret. That even if there is, it's not worth their trouble."

It would be quite a trick, I thought the next day. How do you call a dog off a hot scent? How do you make precognition look like blind, fool luck? I didn't have any ideas, and neither did Bonny. Neither did Howie, when he finally woke up and got enough eggs and bacon into his belly to talk.

I didn't get into the office till nearly noon. By then, Bonny had put in a good morning's work. Howie was home again, dressed in clean clothes from my closet. And I was still stymied.

Vaguely, I thought a look at the future might help. I hooked up the TV and scanned the town. I saw nothing useful, not even a fire. I couldn't even spot the Landrover. I quit, disgusted, and turned to the work that was always waiting. This time it was the agenda for the city council meeting next week. But I didn't get very far; my mind just wouldn't settle down.

Lunch helped. Barbara Johnson ran the diner, and her pie was enough to improve anyone's mood. When I got back to the office, I tried the TV again. That didn't do me any more good than before, but now it didn't discourage me. The big trouble with Howie's gadget was that you couldn't scan time. You were stuck with a fixed focus, so to speak, fifty hours off. So I kept trying. The agenda could wait.

Eventually, my effort was rewarded. It was about five, and I was checking my house for the umpteenth time, scanning right through it on the way to other parts of town. As the view passed through the living room, I stopped. There I was, with Bonny, being tied up with what looked like bell wire and tossed on the couch. The villains were two greasy-looking characters clad in dirty leisure suits. One was tall, fat, and pimply. The other was short and skinny. Both had long hair and grim mouths, but it was the fat one who leaned over Bonny and gave the wire around her wrists an extra twist. She winced.

I watched as the interrogation proceeded. It wasn't pretty. But my attention wasn't entirely on what was being done to us. Instead, I was looking for



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shadows, for possible outs. A little twiddling with the knobs brought out the blur. A little more showed up a nice one, surprisingly strong. I followed the new action until I began to laugh. I laughed so hard that Bonny opened the door to see what was wrong.

I pointed at the screen with one hand while wrapping the other around her waist. "The answer," I managed to get out. "Day after tomorrow, the whole crew will pack up and go home."

She stared at the TV. She saw the main view and gasped. "Look at..." she exclaimed. "How can they...?"

"The shadow, the shadow," I said.

She studied the screen. Finally, she said, "Ah," and grinned. I let go of her to scan the view. I found the broken door through which they would enter. I found the Landrover, parked under a tree down the road, and there I found another useful shadow.

We left the townhall a few minutes later. On the way home, we stopped at Howie's. I told him what I was planning. He replied with a laugh and said, "I'll be by 'bout eight. You'll need help cleaning up."

Once home, I left Bonny to get supper together while I raided the garage for cedar shingles and shingle nails. I hammered the nails through the shingles till they looked like so many wool carders, and then I took them and a spade down the road. I found the spot where the Landrover would park. I laid the shingles on the ground, nails up. I shoveled a little gravel over them so they wouldn't show. And then I went back to the house for supper.

After we'd done the dishes, I cached a wire cutter behind the couch cushion. I hunted up my old .22 target pistol, loaded it, and put it with the cutter. I carefully waxed the front hall floor, laid a braided throw rug in place, and strung a piece of stout monofilament fishing line across the doorway between the hall and the living room. Then I fetched in a cinder block and set it beside the bedroom door. At the last minute, I would set the door ajar and balance the block atop it.

I showed Bonny what I'd done, saying, "Just watch your step if you have to use the hall." She nodded and laughed briefly, making a noise that was more of a snort than anything else. Her mouth was a tight line. She was, I think, remembering what she'd seen Fats doing to her.

I wanted to cheer her up, but I didn't succeed till after we'd had a drink and gone to bed. She'd found out a while back that I've always been partial to redheads. She left her head alone, but she did tint one patch of hair. We both like the effect.

In the morning, when we got to the office, we found signs that someone had been through the place. We knew what they'd been searching for, and we knew they must have been feeling



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frustrated. After all, they hadn't had much success so far. But they hadn't made a mess. Nothing was broken or missing or strewn on the floor, though everything was just a bit awry.

They hadn't found what they wanted. The TV was still on the shelf, the amplifier beside it. I hooked everything up and scanned the town as carefully as I could. It didn't take long to spot Conant's Lotus parked on Church Street, in the driveway of a large old house that had been converted to apartments a few years ago. The house was kept up well, and it still looked like a sea captain's home, though its new status was betrayed by the parking area that had usurped a sizable chunk of the captain's lawn.

I found the Landrover in the garage, which had once been a stable. That was enough to send me scanning through the house, checking apartments until I found our future assailants. Both wore a good coat of bandage. Fats had a cast covering most of his left leg, and his ribs were taped. Shorty's skull was wrapped in gauze, one arm was in a sling, and one bare foot was supported on a hassock. Conant was daubing what looked like iodine on the sole while Shorty winced repeatedly. A roll of bandage sat on the floor beside the hassock.

I called Bonny in from her desk and let her look. She did, too, and with a grin. "Serves 'em right," she said.

"Think we ought to have a word with Thanhauser?"

She looked puzzled.

"I think he's got the emergency room tomorrow night. It'd be a pity if he did too good a job on them."

She brightened. "I'll call him this afternoon." But though we'd made the decision, the picture on the screen didn't change. It hadn't changed the day before either, but then I hadn't quite decided what to do. But now we had, and Fats didn't suddenly start trying to ease his cast. The tape on his ribs didn't suddenly seem too tight. Shorty's sling didn't grow too short or too long. I guessed Dave wouldn't compromise his ethics even in a good cause. Deserve as they might to suffer, he still felt obligated to do the best he could for them. I shrugged and told Bonny, "Don't bother."

Nothing else happened the rest of that day, that night, or the next day, at least till we got home the next night. I got the agenda taken care of, talked the company into boosting my fuel-oil allocation, and disposed of a dozen lesser matters. It was wonderful how my concentration improved once I didn't have the Conant problem to worry about.

When the time came, we went home as usual. We ate supper, I set the cinder block in place, and we sat down at the kitchen table with our second cups of coffee. We knew how things had to turn out, but we were still nervous. Howie's gadget didn't show



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more than probabilities, after all, and even if everything came out all right, we still had to go through the preliminaries. They wouldn't be pleasant.

They weren't. The kitchen door crashed off its hinges right on schedule. Fats and Shorty charged in waving guns, hustled us into the living room, wired us up, hands behind us, and tossed us onto the couch. Then they began the interrogation, starting with Bonny. I supposed they wanted to have the fun part first. Then again, maybe they thought I'd break when I saw what Bonny was going through. But I was never further from breaking. The torn clothes, the indignities, the pain, they only made me frantic to get my hands loose and start *my* program.

They didn't even look at me, and they never noticed my gropings behind the cushion as I found the cutter, right where it was supposed to be, cut the wire at the cost of only a little skin, and then found the pistol. They didn't notice a thing until I plugged Shorty right through the biceps of his outstretched arm, and then it was too late.

"Freeze!" I said. If they heard, they didn't show it. Shorty rolled one way, Fats the other. I banged shots in their directions. That kept them from stopping long enough to draw their own guns. Shorty threw himself at the bedroom door, executing a perfect backwards somersault that left his head in position for the cinder block. It smashed his chin into the floor and left him out cold. Fats found his feet and ran for the front hall. He tripped over the fishline, landed on the rug, and cartwheeled into the wall with an audible crack of bone. He was out too.

Bonny was laughing, but there were tears in her eyes as well. Hysterics. I told myself that was no surprise as I cut her loose. Things had happened awfully fast. We'd gone from down to up in thirty seconds, and even though we'd known what would happen, it had to have an effect.

I let her go on while I collected the bad guys' guns and raided their wallets for their papers and cash. There was quite a lot of the latter. I guessed it was their pay for the job. I figured we had a better right to it, and, besides, it didn't seem a bad idea to add insult to injury.

By then, Bonny had calmed herself down. I tossed my take on the couch beside her and said, "We can replace that dress."

She grimaced—*that* didn't matter—and said, "What are you going to do with them now?"

"Nothing. Throw 'em out." I shrugged. "What else?"

"I wish I had a sharp knife."

"That'd be gelding the lily, wouldn't it?"

"Try me." She stretched her arms and stood up. She walked over to Shorty and kicked him in the ribs, none too gently. He opened his eyes and glared up at her. "So throw 'em out. I'll get a mop. For the blood."

I did what she said. I grabbed Shorty by the collar and hauled him



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past his buddy, out the front door, and onto the lawn. I slapped Fats in the face until he came around, and then I hauled him out too. They struggled to their feet, Fats' broken leg dragging, and I told them, "Tell your boss from me that we were lucky. Maybe he'll believe me now."

And that was it. As soon as they were out of sight, I went back inside; Bonny and I had a brief spell of the shakes—what if the probabilities hadn't worked out?—and Howie showed up with the shingles, a toothy grin, and the laconic report: "Three flats. And the little one stepped on a shingle." Bonny changed, and we cleaned up the blood and bits of wire and crumbs of cinder block, and put the fishline back where it belonged. Then I poured the booze and we all sat down.

Howie wanted to take his antenna apart and forget it had ever existed. I agreed. "If we keep it," I said, "it's only a matter of time before someone else gets wind of it. We might not be so lucky next time."

"Could do a lotta good, though," said Howie as he topped off his glass.

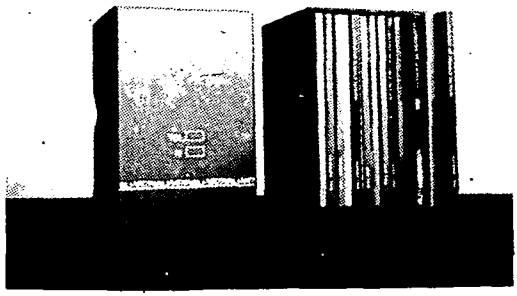
"I don't know," said Bonny. "You got it out of the house awfully quick."

Howie shrugged. I said, "That was Emma."

Bonny looked at me across the table. I wasn't sure just what her expression meant. "Well," she said. "I sure don't want it around this house once we're married."

"Ayuh." I was suddenly uncomfortable. "It wouldn't do much for trust, would it?"

"I know one thing. It would take all the surprise out of Christmas."

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*The alien walked into the Times Square fascination parlor and it said, "We regard you as a form of wildlife...."*

# Fascination

BY

## BILL PRONZINI and BARRY N. MALZBERG

After a time, a necessary break in the action having come *medias res* while monies are collected for the next game and new shills drift in while old shills go away, after a while, as I am stating, I turn to the little guy standing to my left in the place and say, "Actually, fascination is not a metaphor for the real world. Fascination is a metaphor for nothing. There is no point in concerning ourselves with the placement of imaginary balls into imaginary holes aligned when we should be considering the more real and terrible problem of our time which, of course, is that of alien abduction."

The little guy gives me a pained shrug. "I would appreciate your allowing me to concentrate on my game," he said, "as I am three dollars down in twenty minutes but just now beginning to evolve the proper geometries. I cannot engage in questions of metaphor."

"I am doing nothing to oppose your concentration," I say. "It is a break in the activities. The aliens are moving amongst us and selectively taking some of us away to their home base in the Pleiades for nefarious purposes of research. First they cloud the minds of their victims and then they remove them. It is very sinister, this alteration of their perception, since it makes their protests, during abduction, not credible."

The little guy said, "I don't understand pleads. I understand only this game and I wish for you to leave me alone."

The bell for the next game rings at this point and I pass into a long, concentrated funnel of attention in which I attempt to line up five lights on the register by placing the ball in various pockets under the glass pane. The flight of the ball, however, is induced



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by total randomization and hitting five in a row, even with calculated backspin is a matter of the sheerest luck. Nevertheless turning one's attention to the game removes at least temporarily the torment of alien abduction, which is the primary purpose for my engaging in the sport to begin with. After a while the bell rings and my lights drop and the man far at the back says that number thirty-eight has won again, two special coupons. I sigh and place a dollar bill on the counter. "It is all fixed," I say. "It is total randomization and hence won only by shills."

"It is a game of skill," the little guy says, "and it can be beaten. In my youth I beat it consistently but that is of course some time ago. Now I am trying to get back my arm."

"Listen here," I say as the boy with the apron comes down the line and gives me three quarters in exchange for my dollar bill, "how do I know that you are a small man? To me you look about five foot four in approximate stature with beaten eyes and a haunted expression around a rather withered mouth, but this may be the aliens clouding my own mind in preparation for my removal to the Pleiades Cluster. Actually you could be six foot six and very powerful and this might not even be a fascination parlor."

"What might it be?"

"Well," I say after the slightest of pauses, "it might be the Oval Office of the White House for instance."

"And what are you?"

I give him a wink and a wave of the palm. Despite my loquacity I have a core of inner control. "That is for you to speculate."

"I would rather not speculate," the little guy says. "I would rather concentrate on this next round fast upcoming. Getting five balls in a straight line either on the horizontal, diagonal or vertical is certainly difficult enough without conversations about the pleads."

"Pleaides," I say.

"Or the Oval office."

"I am merely filling the time between games," I say. "I do not wish to make transaction upon the private spaces of your heart." On occasion I am capable of a certain elegance of speech, it will be noted, although that elegance cannot conceal the sadness within me, a sadness which has led me to such difficult dialogues with strangers. "Consider the implications," I say reasonably.

"I cannot consider," the little guy says, looking past me anxiously. "I don't even know you."

"Perhaps you do and you won't admit to it."

"Jesus," he says in a nonblasphemous manner. By this time the game has already commenced; I have been so absorbed in our mutual conversation as to have not heard the bell, but whirring and clanging sounds which are those of the game in progress (although they might be the noise of descending alien spaceships) bring me



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back to attention along with my companion. "Two whole pitches," he mumbles and rolls his ball frantically. "I lost two rounds thanks to you."

"Many people occupy the Oval Office from time to time," I say, rolling the ball in a desultory fashion. "I could be a high advisor or a member of one of the houses of Congress, co-equal partners in a bicameral legislature. Then again I could be a foreign dignity." I roll the ball grandly and note that I now have three in a row. "There are no easy answers," I say. "The aliens appearing among us and abducting some of our best and brightest have led me to a permanent distrust of the concept of an orderly universe."

The little guy, sullenly enough, says nothing. I ignore him temporarily and try to get my fourth in a row, but the ball bounces under the glass and rolls without pocketing for a long time. Very frustrating. The bell rings and this time it is number twenty-nine who has won. Since I am sixteen, on the opposite side, I can neither see nor find any interest in number twenty-nine. The little guy wrings his hands. "It is all your fault for distracting me," he says. "It could have been entirely different."

"It could yet be," a woman on my right says, taking her seat. She is a new customer, approximately five feet nine with large secondary sexual organs (I tend to think in a somewhat mechanically detached way) and red hair. "The aliens are wonderful. They are going to change our lives and save our planet from ecological doom."

I smile at her and say, "I am glad to hear you discussing the aliens seriously even though I cannot agree with your point. The aliens are not here to help but merely to study us. After they have had their way, they will probably desert us for another thousand years, although then again they may come in and occupy. It is all very uncertain."

"Of course it is uncertain," she says, taking a quarter out of her enormous handbag, "but that is life itself. Life is uncertain, not to say unfair. We can at least see them as a hopeful symbol, an ambiguous tool of change."

"All right," the little guy says, "I think I have had quite enough and I will remove myself to a quieter section."

"Not so soon," I say, placing a soothing hand on his wrist. "We've got to come to some kind of understanding now at once."

"Understanding of what?"

"Of the problem," I say.

"I do not know what problem you are talking about."

"Of course you do," the redhead says, looming in. "There is only one problem." She pauses. "The aliens," she says.

The man with the microphone says that there will be a slight delay before the next game, which I find convenient since we are now at that point in conversation where utter concentration must apply. We are moving close to



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the center. "She is right, of course," I say. "You can't go on ignoring this. You have to face the truth."

"What truth?"

"The aliens," I say.

"There are no aliens."

"There may not be," I say. "I might even stipulate that. But, at last count, four thousand eight hundred and twenty-seven people in greater New York alone have claimed to have had either visual or vocal contact with alien beings, and seven hundred and sixteen souls have been absent without explanation for periods upwards of forty-eight hours. And furthermore when I narrow my eyes and concentrate, you appear six feet six to me and quite young and strong."

The little guy gets to his feet. "This is ridiculous," he says. "You need help. Your mind is not right."

"That may be true," I say gently. "The ability of the aliens to cloud minds prior to abduction has been well-established, and that is an absolute fact."

"That is true," the redhead says. "That is a stipulated fact. This is not opinion we are discussing but actual actualities."

The guy at the microphone says that the delay will continue as the machinery has temporarily short-circuited. This has no significance other than to indicate that a non-shill has won the last game, an edge which cannot be permitted again, and the mechanics are hard at work. It is another form of the small corruption which infests Times Square, but in a world of larger corruption I find these little, more visible, swindles relaxing.

"He does not believe you," the redhead says to me. "He thinks that you are talking through a cocked hat. He has not read the papers nor apprehended the realities. Such people are not worth your time and effort."

It is purgative to hear this, particularly from a person of large secondary sexual characteristics. "You are right," I say. I arrest the little man in midflight by a shirt cuff. "You may stay," I say. "You may remain here unharassed. I will waste no more time. In fact, I will concentrate on the game of fascination now. I would like to win at least one game of fascination before I die." I pull him back to his seat; despite what I know behind his mask to be his enormous size, he comes easily, like a small person. "Sit," I say. "You will not be bothered."

"You are not bothering him even now," the redhead says. "And he is not worth your concern."

Confused, the little guy rearranges himself in his seat. "There are no aliens," he says.

"I will not discuss this any more. I will not say a single word."

"There is no alien contact," he says desperately. "There are no UFO sightings nor seven hundred and sixteen missing. If there were I would have read of it."

"The press lies all the time," I say



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with superb calm. The redhead nods. "They cannot be trusted on any level."

*"There are no aliens."*

"You may think that and in your mind it may even be true but there are lots of people who feel otherwise and the number of disappearances is increasing all the time, to say nothing of thousands walking around with clouded minds. It is all part of the great scheme," I say, "but I will not discuss it any more."

"No more," the redhead says. "Let the world be a fascination parlor."

"And I will be a bouncing ball," I say to her merrily.

"Exactly," she says. "Would you like to switch seats, honey? That way I'll be sitting next to him and you next to me, one seat apart. I will thus insulate you from his presence."

"That is gracious of you," I say, "but I feel I must stay here. I must accept my responsibilities. I am a desperately responsible person and will deal with the cards, so to speak, as they are dealt."

The man with the microphone says that the double bonus is now beginning. I am glad to hear this because double bonus games pay exactly twice as much, and I have decided to make a conscientious effort to win this one game. If there is one thing I can do it is to prevail when I really put my mind to it. "I will deal with the situation myself," I say to the redhead." I am not intimidated even by six-feet-six young guys no matter how strong and punishing their frame and malevolent their manner."

"Five *four*," the little guy says, "and I am sixty-one years old with slight crippling arthritis of the hands. *Damn* it, you will not play fascination, will you? You simply refuse to accept the situation."

"He will," the redhead says. "He is a strong man."

"I am," I say, "she is right." My voice, like the little guy's, is quite loud and I realize that we have brought matters to something of a halt. We are being stared at. Quickly, cleverly, as the bell rings just then, I seize the ball and roll it. It goes in swift for once, one off dead-center. Two in a row. It returns quickly and I roll it again. It meditates on the board, then scuttles in line. Three. I take the return bounce and roll it skillfully toward the upper right. It goes in.

"See?" I say to my left, waiting for the return. "It is all a matter of mind control."

"You have utterly distracted me," the little guy says, "and you have manipulated this game with your talk of aliens."

"Leave him alone," the redhead says. "Can't you see that he is on the verge of a winning game?"

The ball is back in my hand. Getting excited despite myself, feeling an involvement that I had sought to deny, I roll it frantically. It would be nice to win a double bonus, if only to prove that my mind is relatively unclouded.



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"Aha!" I say as it almost dumps in for a fifth but it does not; it goes off center, drops in for a repeat and comes dribbling back to me reluctantly. Salivating, I wait for it. "Don't panic, honey," the redhead says. "Nice and easy." The little guy kicks my shin.

The ball back in my hand, I center myself for what I know will be the big five and the double-bonus coupons returnable for ten dollars worth of needed merchandise...and at that precise moment, *deus-ex*, the alien walks in.

I believe in the aliens, I accept as do few others, their circumstance and purposes, and yet it is shocking to see one come walking calmly into the Forty-second Street fascination parlor just as I am about to embark on the pitch that will give me big five in a row. He is a small alien, about four foot three, which is how I know right away that he is an alien because all of the reported sightings have had them listed at around four feet three, give or take an inch. Otherwise, he looked like a human being. Or almost like a human being; part of his tail was showing at the bottom of his modest herringbone sports jacket.

No one, not even the redhead, noticed him of course. It is a well-known fact that the aliens are invisible except to the very few who actually see them and who of course are scorned or mocked if they make the sightings public, which so many of them unfortunately have. I maintain my demeanor, trying to think of my missing bit five, and then the alien walks over to me with utter determination, much as if I were the only person in the parlor. He removes a piece of paper from the inner pocket of his neat, rather dapper herringbone jacket and says, "It is all over and you are to come with me at once."

"You must have the wong party," I say with amazing calm.

"I have the right party," the alien says, "and no time to negotiate. You are to come peaceably or it will be necessary to cloud your mind even further, render you totally unconscious and take you by force. You may be permanently damaged in that case, but it is all the same to us. We regard you as a form of wildlife."

"Let me finish my game," I say. The redhead meanwhile is looking at me with great attention, even if the little guy is not. I have the aspect of course of a wild-eyed man talking to himself. "I have a right to finish the *game* anyway," I say, and the redhead gives me the softest and most sympathetic of smiles.

"Not here," she says.

"Come along," the alien says and clamps a delicate, fast-moving little hand on my shoulder. I feel electric currents of tension beginning to pass between us in an almost electric way, which come to think of it is the way that electric contact would be manifested by the aliens, advanced species technologically as they must be. "It is all over, "the alien says again. "These



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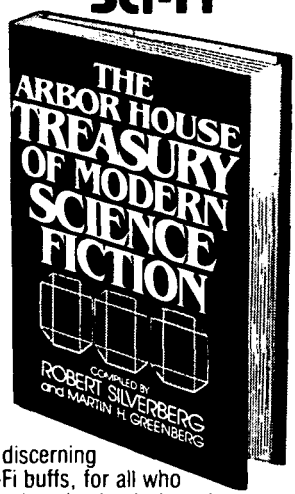
dialogues have been meaningless time-wasting, and your perceptions do you no good. Come now."

I turn to the small guy and the redhead, who to my amazement are grouped together, in earnest conference. They must have known each other all the time or at least have gotten to know one another swiftly because their posture is intimate, their whisperings of the most confidential kind. I understand then what has been done to me. I have been set up. "For God's sake," I say, "if you won't help me, at least let me get my five in a row." I grip the ball with sticky hand. "Now," I say, "now." I flail it forward. The alien tugs me warningly.

"Sock it to 'em, honey," the redhead says indolently as the ball skips under shattered glass. "Give them hell, Mr. President."

The little guy, blushing says, "I'm sorry, I couldn't do it any other way," and we all watch as the ball skips down the deadly center for a fault, rolling all the way down and down the corridors of the Oval Office, and it is at that moment as the insistent alien drags me into the chambers of Forty-second Street and to his rocket that the selective but brutal and terrible Occupation of Earth reaches, one might say, its high point.


The ultimate Sci-Fi

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ARBOR HOUSE




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*Bruce McAllister's most recent F&SF stories were "Missionary Work," (December 1978) and "Victor," (July 1977). This new novelet is a striking tale about a man with amnesia who searches for a lost art, the art of performing miracles....*

# What He Wore For Them

BY

**BRUCE McALLISTER**

He awoke before dawn, struggling up out of a nightmare of endless fire and screams of despair, into the darkness of a room he did not understand, into a body he did not recognize.

He lay there terrified, unable to move, trying desperately to shape himself from memories that just weren't there. The darkness, the total blindness to the world and what he was, was as horrible as the fires; but when he tried to flee, to regain the oblivion of sleep, the fires returned to prevent his passage, forcing him back into the room, back to the darkness, where he lay clenched until dawn.

When the first light touched the room, he made himself try. He made himself move. He got up, he turned on the light, he checked the dresser drawers, the wallet he found in one of them, and the closet. What he found told him nothing: three linen suits and a dozen white shirts in the closet, underwear in the drawers, no reading material of any kind. In the wallet ten thousand *lire* in small bills, no traveler's checks, no identification of any kind. He was in a foreign country; that was all he knew.

He glanced in the dresser mirror and stopped.

It was an alien face that looked back at him. Gaunt, pale, the blue eyes circled with periorbital shadows. (Periorbital? Why that word?) Despite the blue eyes, the physiognomy was Near Eastern or Mediterranean. The face was long; the nose, aquiline. The dark hair was oily, unwashed, flattened to his head and uncut, coiling almost to his shoulders. The dark beard was feral but not full.

The face held him.

It was a kind face, yes, but agoniz-



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ed. It was forceful, yet gentle. And primitive, yet enlightened. The effect was powerful...and calculated. The calculation bothered him, but he could not look away.

There was, he realized, something familiar, hauntingly so, about the face. But the familiarity was not that of one's own face—not at all. Was it a face from a dream? From a painting? From someone else's memory...?

The face upset him. It upset him very much. The whites of the eyes seemed to glow below the irises. It was the look of sorcery, or of illness of the body, or soul....

He pulled himself away. He walked to the door, made himself open it, and peered outside cautiously.

What he saw was a corridor. A hotel hallway. This was something he could understand.

He dressed—made himself dress—in one of the three suits, and went downstairs. Perhaps someone would address him by name, on the way, or in the lobby when he reached it.

No one did.

The hallways were empty this early, and the only figure in the lobby, the concierge, refused to look up from a newspaper.

He could have approached him, but did not. For some reason the figure, so still there behind the counter, frightened him. It was silly, but it frightened him.

*The Hotel Byron.* He remembered this as he stood in the lobby. And when he stepped outside, onto the travertine patio that overlooked an almost tideless beach, he remembered the name of the village, too.

*Lerici. L'Erici. The city of Eric.*

He tried to calm himself with what he could remember.

The poet Shelley and his young wife Mary had lived here long ago, not far from this hotel, in a great morbid villa that had long since crumbled. And the older poet Byron—decadent and hedonistic—had been their good friend until Shelley left in a small boat before a storm, and his body washed up near Viarreggio, and their romantic sojourn ended.

All of this he remembered. Facts about the world were flooding back to him now.

Of *himself* he still could remember nothing, and it made him tremble.

There were images, yes—whole scenes—that *felt* like memories: A childhood spent on a long flowing lake in the Northwest, playing "Green Mountain Boys" with friends among the cedars and three kinds of birch. And high school years—suntans and cars and first love—in a big sun-washed city on a great bay....

But these visions were sad and distant, as though read from a book, as though borrowed from another's life. Someone—he himself, or someone else—wanted him to believe they were his.

They were not.

Still shaking, he took the sidewalk



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that curved toward the little bay, toward the mall, the jetty, the fishing boats, the castle that overlooked them, and the apartment buildings—pastel, ancient and tacky—that clustered below.

The castle—a youth hostel now, he remembered—was a relic from that endless era when the little bay was a minor possession juggled between the city-states of Pisa and Genoa. Another relic of that era was the little church, whose image came to him suddenly, disturbingly, the tiny church further into town and dwarfed by the stucco apartments and the baroque civil buildings.

These were the kinds of things he could remember.

And wasn't this typical of amnesia—tropic-hysteric amnesia as well as the other forms? One lost oneself, but retained the world?

The vision of the church persisted. It was up Via San Sebstiano, yes? Beyond the bend where the largest produce market sat. A tiny church...: dark and damp....

The church called to him. He could not see its interior clearly, but it called to him.

When he reached the umbrella pines where Via San Sebastiano emptied from the hills above and ended at the cement promenade by the bay, he stopped and looked around him. All of it was familiar. He knew this village well; he had been here for weeks.

From where he stood he still could not see the church. The street curved too much. But it was there, he knew.

He felt eyes on him then.

He turned slowly but found no eyes.

The old man seated on the new cement bench looking out to sea—at the hazy skyline of La Spezia perhaps—was not looking at him. And the middle-aged man, scoliotic, a little drunk, and fishing with a bright-red bobber from the new clean rocks, wasn't looking at him. And the two women in tight black dresses—one a degenerative-arthritic, the other diabetic-retinopathic—weren't looking at him either. Wobbling under the weight of the full shopping bags, they were paying no attention at all—

Or was that true?

Hadn't one of them whispered to the other a minute ago? Hadn't she glanced at him quickly right before that?

He just hadn't made the connection before.

And hadn't the other woman then made a gesture at her chest, a gesture which he now realized had probably been the sign of the cross. He could not be sure. But he began to tremble.

The voice entered him then.

It split his skull. It weakened his knees. And it was so familiar.

*Dominus illuminatio!* it shrieked, echoing, falling. *By this sign-ing,* it shrieked, *I beseech you-you—*

He stumbled, stopped, and stood there.



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*The church.* He must get to the church.

He took a step and the voice screamed: *Domine refugium! Sparest thou he who is penitent, restorest thou he who—*

He had braced himself and taken another step, but the only thing he heard now was the *who* fading like a bone falling into the darkest well.

He took another step, and another. Slowly he made his way across the street, to the sidewalk, up the via.

As he approached the eroded face of the tiny church, he kept his eyes on it. He could feel so many of the villagers around him, and he did not want to look at them. He could hear their steps, catch their forms in the corners of his eyes. He could feel dozens of heads turn to look at him. He could hear dozens of voices whispering in awe, nurturing the rumors, the stories about him.

But what *were* the rumors, the stories?

He could discern dozens of hands moving through the air over chests, drawing crosses, and he could hear the silent invocations.

*They all wanted miracles,* he remembered suddenly, and the realization horrified him.

And they believed *he* could give them those miracles.

He must keep his eyes on the church and on it alone. He must not look away, even for a second, for in a second someone's eyes might capture and hold him, demanding one of the miracles that he had somehow—God help him—led them to believe he could bring about.

One figure began toward him, but when he kept his eyes on the church, the figure stopped and returned to the shadows.

Another figure did the same, following him for a while but eventually giving up.

And another, and another.

When it finally happened, he couldn't help it.

The footsteps sounded loudly, loud as gunshots, to his left, and without thinking he turned.

Out of the alley a boy of ten had appeared at a run, shoes slapping hard, almost to him now. The boy was not smiling. He was not embarrassed. He was panting and afraid, burning with a fear.

The boy had, he realized, been waiting for him there in the alley near the church. He had known the foreigner would come there today. All of the villagers seemed to know it. They lined the streets as though waiting.

The boy was babbling, gesturing frantically, and almost touching him.

He found himself reaching out, touching the boy, taking the thin arm firmly in his own long fingers.

The boy stiffened, paled, but then relaxed. He still was not smiling, but he was not trying to break away.

Slowly the boy led him down the alley, and the man found himself sub-



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mitting. At the alley's end, the boy took him up a hundred or more steps to a gravel road—across that road—up a steep olive-shaded hill toward...Pozzuoli?—yes, Pozzuoli. He knew where they were heading.

The boy was telling him something, repeating it again and again: "E molto ammalata—é gravamente ammalata. Ha bisogna d'aiuto."

Somehow he understood it. He did not know their language, but he understood it. *The grandmother was very sick...she had never been sick with this before...she had gotten it from the Cicchinellis in Lerici, or so his mother said...and he—the foreigner—was the one, the only one, who could help—*

He tried to release the boy's arm then, but the boy was holding his sleeve.

*You will help her,* the boy's eyes said. *You have helped others.* The eyes were like a dozen hands on his sleeve.

He let the boy lead him on.

They took the stone path that ridged the hills, a path that felt as ancient as the Etruscans. They wound their way through the orchards, past lichen-covered walls that disappeared and reappeared like a dream, and finally approached a group of children who were knocking chestnuts from a tree with sticks.

The children stopped and stared at them. Some of them smiled. One—a girl who looked more Teutonic than Mediterranean—began to sing a song, an eerie thing. It sounded like a hymn. A little boy—her brother perhaps—joined her.

He didn't understand the words of the hymn, and he did not understand why they were singing it. But the singing sent a fire through him.

He must get to the church. He must.

The voice returned then, shrieking, and he staggered. *As it was in the beginning,* the voice howled, *must it forever be? World without end—*

The boy was staring at him.

He let him lead him on.

The singing was far behind them when they reached the tall walls of Pozzuoli and passed through. He recognized the tiny village immediately, a dark, damp dungeon of a village. Perhaps he'd even met this boy before. Didn't the boy's eyes say this?

They turned on a cobblestone street, one far too narrow for automobiles, and moved rapidly downhill, past one doorway, one gaping darkness after another, all of the gray walls glowing with red hammers-and-sickles which someone had splashed on hurriedly. So many walls glowing red... They were all communist villages, he remembered; but only Pozzuoli had such walls.

Long before the boy's eyes and gait gave it away, he knew which doorway it was. It was one of the two or three without the glow of red paint nearby, but this was not how he recognized it.

As they neared it, a figure stepped from the doorway, its downturned



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face a mask of sorrow. It looked down the street, then up—and saw them. The mask fell; the face grew animated; the figure stepped frantically back into the doorway, disappearing.

*You must get away,* he told himself. *Now.*

When the doorway was but steps away, he began to hear the moaning from inside, the rasp of lungs sunk in edema, the delirium of pulmonic rupture, the fever, the tachycardia, the toxins of the bacilli. The voice was an ancient one, and it was in horrible pain. It was singing a song of pain a million years old. It was louder than anything he had ever heard, as loud as the terrible Voice that had risen above the tiny shrieks and screams of his dream.

He was supposed to stop the pain. They believed he could; they believed he would.

He closed his eyes, and the prayer came easily.

*O Almighty God, giver of health, provider of succour, we entreat thy strength and goodness in behalf of this thy servant—*

Nothing was happening. The moans still came. The old woman in the room was still teeming with bacilli. The room was teeming; her relatives and friends were teeming.

*—that she may be healed of her infirmities, to thine honour and glory, amen.*

Nothing at all was happening. he could do nothing. He could do nothing. He could stare and pray and gesture and pretend all he wanted, and nothing would happen.

He turned then and ran.

*Deus ultionum!* the voice shrieked faintly, barely audible in his skull.

*Tetracycline or streptomycin therapy,* another voice murmered inside him.

He did not look back.

When he reached the hotel, he thrust his shaking hands into his pockets and tried to hurry through the lobby with his eyes on the carpet.

A voice stopped him.

"Signor Abramson."

He recognized the name.

It was his.

He stopped and turned to the voice.

A man, dark and slim and effete, was facing him, passport in hand. It was the concierge. And the man did not look at all afraid, or awed, or supplicant. The man looked puzzled.

The concierge looked at him and he looked back.

"You asked me to remind you," the concierge said. His English had a British accent; he had not learned it in an Italian school. To show it off, he added patronizingly, "We are sorry to lose you." He was not particularly sincere. "You will not find another town like ours all that easily, you know." He smiled.

This man, he realized, did not ex-



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pect miracles from him.

Only the *paesani* of the village did.

He took the passport with a trembling hand, thanked the man, and proceeded to the elevator. Inside, the pages of the document resisted his fingers.

The passport said he was "David Phillip Abramson." It said that he had been born in Baltimore, Maryland, of the United States of America. It said he was thirty-two years old. It said many things.

He did not believe any of them.

He again searched his belongings. When he again found nothing, he collapsed into the chair on the balcony and stared at the glittering cove.

Some would call it amnesia. Was it that simple?

What of the terror, what of the shrieking voice that filled him without warning?

And the villagers. What had he done that they could expect miracles from him?

Was he a priest? The voice that filled his skull spoke the language of priests. *From all evil and sin, from the crafts and assualts of the devil, from thy wrath, from everlasting damnation deliver us. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of sin I shall walk as another (have mercy upon us!) world without end, amen, amanus, a manus tuae fecerunt, dominus regit me, deisdaimonia de profundis!*

Was he a doctor? The terms—the diagnoses, prognoses, prophylactica and contraindications for the inhabitants of this village—rose to his tongue with the ease of schooling. *Intussusception, hypertrophic pyleric stenosis, necrotica indicating avascularization of the site.*

A doctor who *promised* miracles was a charlatan. Was he this?

Was he some religious zealot affecting a medical lexicon to enchant these villagers and convert them—along with thousands of others—to his monomaniacal creed?

He remained in the chair until after the sun had set. It was the dying twilight—the darkness blinding him and letting the terror flicker behind his eyes without mercy—that finally drove him inside to the sanctuary of artificial light.

And it was inside that he realized he wasn't hungry, that he had, in fact, felt no hunger all day.

He should have been hungry and was not. He was human, wasn't he? Why wasn't he hungry?

The explanation came slowly, and he resisted it.

*You do not need food.*

He turned on all three lights—the overhead and the two lamps. But the light was not enough—not at all. He opened the door into the corridor to let more light in.

*You cannot leave the door open like that.*

He closed it.



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He laid down on the bed carefully, closed his eyes, and invited the tide of darkness behind them.

He did not invite it from fatigue. He did not need sleep, he knew. As he did not need food.

He invited it as he would have a revelation, or a giving-up, or a drug—although, as he also knew, no drug would have had an effect on him.

*They are falling, all of them, down through the longest, bluest sky, toward a horizon lit by fire that licks at their heels like the tongues of many-headed dogs guarding kingdoms below. They are falling, they have been falling, they will fall, and a Voice as broad as the sky, as loud as the hearts of stars, is screaming with the wrath of eons. This Voice, this Other, fills the sky with a light hotter than all the licking tongues below, and as they fall, falling forever, the Voice changes, changes horribly, becomes the voice of a woman giving birth to a taloned, kicking reptile larger than she...the voice of a man with a glass rod—anointed with holy water—inserted in his organ and then shattered...the voice of a child raped on horseback by a blind soldier who can only stare...the voice of a father whose sons are holding him down, cutting his tongue from his throat with a blade of obsidian that flickers like fire.*

*He is the one who is falling, and this should not be. He is the one—the only one of them—who is sorry. It should not have happened, this he knows. He had never before shown signs of such perversity—never. And he had always loved the Voice. It was their stronger peer, the one who had led them, only he, who deserved this.*

*"Culpa sua!" he shrieks. "Culpa sua!"*

*"Canst thou lift up thy voice to the clouds," he shrieks "that abundance of forgiveness may wash over me!"*

*"Canst thou send lightning," he screams, "that they may go, that they may say: Thou are forgiven!"*

*He shrieks many things, as he falls. There is time for all of them, but no one hears it. His screams of remorse, of repentance, are as feeble as the feathers the wind tears from his wings now, as faint as the ring of light fading from his brow, as insignificant as his teeth (which are lengthening now), as his pale skin (which is turning black), as the flapping leather of his new wings, tail, and face.*

He awoke with a shriek that echoed in the room like the voice of a beast.

Stumbling to his feet, he rushed to the mirror, raised his hands, and touched his face.

It was not leathery. It was not black. The teeth were not unusually long. The gaunt white face with the blue blue eyes looked back at him.

It was, yes, a face that one could expect miracles from. It was—


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He recognized it then—this face. He understood what it was. And as he did, as the beauty of it came to him, he felt for a moment what he had so long wanted to feel.

But with the beauty came the pain, the memory of who he was, and he had to stop it. The memory, the pain, should not be, and so he shut them out again like jaws closing.

The water disappeared from his eyes. The feelings went away.

A few moments later he could not remember what the feelings had been like.

He searched the room again and soon found what he needed: a pin lodged in the corner of one of the drawers.

Pressing as hard as he could—teeth clenched against the sudden, absurdly sharp pain of it—he drew the pin along the side of his arm.

He had not pressed hard enough. The pain had prevented it.

He repeated it and found that the pain had changed in kind. It no longer prevented him from pressing hard.

Blood had appeared liberally along the line. He drew it again, over the first, and when he was through, repeated the act once more.

The arm was aflame now. He had managed to gouge out a narrow gulley running twelve or so inches.

It was what he needed.

He stepped to the table, placed the pin on it, and took a deep breath.

Staring at the red line, he concentrated.

He concentrated for a long time.

Nothing happened. The pain was a throb now, different, less intense. The blood had stopped oozing, yes, but this meant nothing—merely the work of the clotting agent, the fibrinogen. The blood and pain did not interest him anyway; only the gulley in his arm—the marred flesh—did.

When he tried to concentrate again, he found he could not.

He moved to the bed, lay down carefully, and closed his eyes.

The arm burned like a bush on fire.

He tried to imagine the most beautiful landscape he could. He saw the greenest trees, the whitest cataracts, the bluest skies—

—and opened his eyes frantically when dark figures began to fall through that sky.

He must use safer images, he told himself.

He saw a woman. The most sensual, tantalizing of women. Her breasts as white as living marble. Her shoulders the gold of untouched beaches. The hair of her *mons veneris* as blond as the down on her arms... those arms so svelte, perfect, unmarred, as she moved toward him like a gazelle in slow motion, her breasts rising, her nostrils flaring—

He saw himself then, his own body, his own arms—both of them perfect, unmarred.


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He looked at his arm.

Nothing changed.

He saw a hundred men and women then, naked, emaciated, all with gulleys down their arms, all in a shower together, all trying desperately to claw their way out through the cement walls with only their fingernails, as the gases began to steam through the shower heads.

But he saved them. He stopped history and saved them. He dissipated the gas, he crumbled the walls, he let the fragrance of ponderosas and jasmine and honeysuckle stream through the shower heads instead, and with a caress of his eyes, his eyes alone, he smoothed their hunger away, he smoothed the skin on their arms until it was perfect, unmarred, unscarred.

It was a miracle. He was a man of miracles, his face a face one could expect miracles from.

He looked at his arm.

Even the shower—a vision that had left him trembling—had not been enough.

When he had tried everything—every dream, every scene, every miracle of arms and scars that he could think of—he did not bother to look at his arm. He did not need to. He simply let go, and wept.

The weeping did not tire him at all.

His eyes did not close.

At dawn he found himself rising from the chair with the mildest of hopes.

He had failed to heal himself, yes. But perhaps that only meant he could not heal *himself*. Perhaps he could heal only other flesh, and only if in the proper frame of mind.

He left the hotel by the back entrance, a small door that opened onto the gravel of Via San Giuseppe, the road that wound forever through the olive groves high on the hills.

He walked for an hour. He walked past four quiet *villettas* and their black iron gates, past the stench of a cesspool foolishly sunk in rocky ground, past convent walls topped with shards of glass, past two damp shanties, past olive grove after grove, past dirt roads that led nowhere, and ancient crumbling walls, and dozens of flying grasshopperlike insects that looked more like mantises—and that were not, he decided, large enough for his purpose.

As he rounded one curve, he met a grove whose trees were stunted near the road, letting the sunlight reach it in a long, wide swath.

It was there that he saw the lizard.

It was still early, and the sunlight still cool. The lizard shouldn't have been there. But it was.

The animal was green, soft and oddly pretty. "Una creatura d'Assissi," as these people would call it.

It was lethargic with the coolness of morning.

He leaned down slowly and gathered up a handful of pebbles. He would not, he knew, be able to hit it with a single stone.

He took aim.



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He did not release them.

He could feel eyes on him.

He looked around, but he found no one. Still, he could feel the eyes.

*Is this right?* the eyes asked. *To kill in order to test it?*

It is only a lizard, he answered. As a death it's a forgivable one, is it not?

And how else will I know?

He threw them as hard and straight as he could, and even before they struck, he knew which stone it would be.

It was almost perfectly white, and when it struck the lizard's skull, it caved it in.

The body slid from the rock and began to twist on the ground.

A tiny scream had sounded in his head, he realized. The voice of something dying, something falling—

—falling because of something done—

—falling because—

Again he stopped it. Again he shut it out.

He felt water in his eyes and blinked it away quickly.

He looked at the lizard. It was no longer twitching.

He went to it. knelt down and picked it up. It was warm in his palm.

*Please.*

He stared at the small body. He held his breath again.

*Please, God, let it move.*

I sound like a child, he said to himself. I sound just like a child. I can't help it, he answered.

He prayed again.

*Please, God, let it move.*

He had expected no answer, and there was none. The word "God" did not reverberate. The body in his palm did not twitch. It was cooler, stiffer now.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and made himself see a lizard with blinking, living eyes, its heart pounding in its scaly chest like a little fist.

He kept his eyes closed. Nothing was stirring in his hand.

Perhaps if he let whatever image wanted to come, come. Perhaps if he didn't force it.

A legless lizard, flaming and falling, loomed suddenly in his head, and he struck at it reflexively, driving it away. It came again, and he struck out again, and again, the night yawning below, the flames flickering far below as he flew high above the horror, high in the light, loved by the voice of light.

When the vision ended, he was trembling. The body was cold in his hand.

*I must control the images. I must not allow that to happen again.*

He forced himself to see a lizard with a rainbow in its eyes, the rainbow healing it as it moved.

He forced himself to see a lizard fetus, curled, not yet free of its leathery egg, a thing therefore perfect, the lids closed, the head smooth and beautiful....

He made himself see a lizard with a



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man's face—the man he imagined to be his brother. But the vision wouldn't hold. He had no brother. The memories that said he did were lies....

He placed the little body on its back on the rock, the white belly revealed like the inside of a child's arm, and found himself muttering childish things to "God," things which embarrassed him as soon as they were uttered.

On his despair he knew he must leave. He could not face the village any longer. He entered the hotel through the back entrance, and when he reached his corridor and came in sight of his room, he froze.

A small crowd was at his door. Children as well as adults. A large family. Boys in shorts, the girls in smocks, the men and women tall and bony.

His door was open.

*They were in his room, too.*

He started to turn, to flee, but one of the figures saw him, alerted the others, and their eyes were on him in an instant.

He began toward them. Their eyes pulled him, and he obeyed.

When he reached them, they parted like a sea of grass, and he stepped inside. Each step was like a slow dream, like a step through gem-blue water.

Inside, the family was avoiding the bed, and he could not see why.

When the men, women and children finally parted before him, he noticed the two figures on his bed. A woman of about forty, thin and pale, and a younger woman—no, a spindly girl.

There was one man who was not avoiding the bed. He too was thin, and the spindly girl had his nose and deep-set eyes.

The man was looking at him, smiling painfully, and waving two small photographs. "Mi moglie e mi filgia," he was saying, "non ce la fanno...." He said it once and only once. He continued to wave the photographs, closer now, in the foreigner's face.

He stared at the two figures on the bed and did not understand the man's concern. He could see an ulcer on the mother's ankle—the sign of some peripheral vascular disease...perhaps diabetes. She was tired enough, her life hard enough, that the ulcer didn't surprise him. But was this what they wanted of him? That he heal an ulcer—nothing more? A doctor wouldn't do? For this they needed a man of miracles?

It angered him that they should want a miracle for something like this.

Then he took another look and saw how ill both of them were. Both were pale, stuporous, and both were breathing rapidly and shallowly. And they were twisting ever so slowly on the bed, as those in constant pain do.

He noticed the woman's neck then. The sides were distended and red, and the distension, he could see, was from two nasty red bumps, like great boils. He looked at the girl. Her neck had no



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boils, but she was scratching at her armpits, now at her groin. She was scratching—

The woman coughed. Long and hard—paroxysmally. It racked her body.

*Dear God.*

He was certain now. The boils were buboes—the lymph glands poisoned by the bacilli, full of the bacilli, suppurating.

He remembered suddenly the grandmother in Pozzuoli.

*Dear God.*

He understood the cause of her edema now. A primary pneumonic case infected by a bubonic with respiratory complications— by this woman on his bed. The old woman in Pozzuoli would never have the luxury of buboes: The pneumonic variety was quick.

These were the Cicchinellis of Lerici.

*Dear God.*

But how? In this day and age?

The answer rose with the ease of schooling, though he had never been schooled in it, had never even read a book about it. *La Spezia, a port. A port, rats. Rats: fleas, with proboscises engorged with bacteria. The traditional Eurasian maritime spread, so different from the feral vectors of the North American reservoirs.*

Aerial droplets, warm and teeming with *Pasteurella pestis*, incubating for two to five days. From her sickbed in their apartment, this woman had coughed on the old woman who had come to see her. Even had the old woman washed her hands, it wouldn't have made any difference.

*Dear God.*

Where were the doctors? Where were the medical personnel and therapies that La Spezia and the health organizations could provide—tetracycline, streptomycin, heat-killed vaccines, face masks with eighteen-gauze layers, the other prophylactica against its spread.

He knew where the doctors were. They were still in La Spezia, and Genoa, Florence, Milan, Turin and Rome. They had not been called. He was the "healer," so he was the first to know. He could heal them, the Cicchinellis believed. Why bring in others? Why risk offending this "healer" with the hautingly familiar face?

He could do nothing for these people. He must get away. He must leave these plague-teeming bodies on his bed, this town of insects and lungs swarming with the horror.

He started to turn, but the man stopped him. He waved the photographs hard in his face.

He looked at the photographs at last.

One was of a man's arm, whole. The other was of an arm—the same, it appeared—with a thick stump where the hand had once been.

But what was the significance? An arm before amputation, and the same



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arm with the scars of amputation? Two photographs taken with the same camera apparently. Apparently at the same—

The husband was pointing at the photographs with wild fingers, jabbing first at the amputated arm, then at the whole arm. The amputated arm, then the whole—

He understood it at last.

These were photographs of a *miracle.* They were *proof* of a miracle. They showed how a man, years without a hand, had been given back that hand.

And he was the one who had done it. He was the one who had performed this miracle for them.

*Dear God.*

He turned and struck out at the nearest bodies, which stepped back as though electrocuted. No one tried to stop him, but the sudden tide of anger—of rage, of sudden hysteria behind him—made his legs move faster.

It was a handgun that stopped him. Blue and oiled, it waved in his face, the barrel unable to sight itself.

At the other end of the arm was a uniformed *carabiniere,* a member of the family, a uniform he had somehow overlooked in the crowd. The man was a little drunk.

Again he understood it. Again he somehow understood what no one could tell. He understood all of them, the entire family—even Carlo. This was Carlo, the only *carabiniere* in the Cicchinelli family, the man to whom his sister had said that morning, "Carlo, it is up to you to do something if he tries to leave. You are the one who can." And Carlo had had a few drinks just in case—in case he might have to do something. He had, after all, heard the rumors of what had happened that morning in Pozzuoli....

The man's finger was flexing stupidly on the trigger. Carlo did not want to be doing this, but he had to.

The foreigner struck out then at the gun—as hard as he could—as fast as he could.

The gun jerked and went off. A man screamed, a woman moaned, and the foreigner was pushing through them again, brushing against the coarse *carabiniere* uniform, clawing his way through the door.

The gun did not fire again.

It took him a while to find the bus he needed. He was staring straight ahead and stumbling, and it took him a long time.

The bus he wanted would carry him to the end of Via Santa Teresa, the road that wound past the castle, rimmed the cliffs outside the town, and ended in a cul-de-sac above the next cove, the inhospitable "Maralunga"...the place he wanted.

As the bus trembled through Lerici and made its way up the hill, he kept his eyes on his knees. Although he could feel their stares, none of the passengers tried to approach him. For this he was grateful.



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He left the bus awkardly, stumbling on the pavement when he reached it, and barely noticed that he was the only one to get off.

As he began to walk through the shrubbery, toward the cliffs, he could hear the bus struggling to turn around behind him. Abruptly the sound ended, and no sound other than the wind replaced it.

He was alone.

It was important that he be alone.

The hope was only a glimmer. And if it proved false, the action would still be the proper one.

He had healed others before. That was clear. The photographs proved it; the pleading of the villagers proved it.

Now, for whatever reason, he was unable to.

Why the amnesia? Why the loss of his "power"? The two were related—that was clear. The answers, he knew, flickered in the nightmare, in the shrieking voices, in his own familiar face. He had, he felt sure, been on the verge of remembering, of seeing the block dissolve two or three times. In fact, he suspected that the block had even crumbled those times, but that—for some ungodly reason—he had chosen to erect it again each time.

Why should he choose to do this?

He knew....

It was the fear. He was afraid of remembering.

The hope stirred again.

If he'd once been able to heal, he should be able to heal again. It was only logical. Only the block was preventing it.

But he needed the proper circumstances.

He stepped to the edge of the cliff, looked down, and before his eyes could focus, was hit by vertigo.

But no voices came.

He surveyed the cove below. As he'd prayed, it was empty of people, inaccessible with its sheer cliffs and rocky shore. Whatever the outcome, he did not wish to do this in front of others. He was tired of their eyes.

The sand was incredibly white even under ten meters of gem-blue water, and for a moment the vision calmed him.

The cliff wasn't really sheer, he noted. It sloped a little. He would strike the base of it, not the dark basaltic rocks of the shore. Unless he rolled to them. Certainly he would not reach the—

It was then that he jumped. It surprised him a little that he did it, but he'd known he would have to surprise himself.

He jumped long and far, and as he did, as his momentum faded and the earth began to pull at him, his head filled with memories of high school, of the salmon-pink buildings, the hard-packed track, and the year he'd been a decent broadjumper, decent enough to impress two girls.

But the high school was hazy. *It wasn't his. He had never been a broadjumper.*


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The air tore by him and for an instant he could feel sharp pains in his arms, as though feathers were being pulled from his flesh. *Avis Dei,* he heard a voice say calmly, as the air whistled by the fear of death chilled his chest with adrenalin and the hysterical will to live rose in him like a bird.

He wanted to live. He wanted to stop falling. He must save himself.

But he did not do so.

*Perhaps,* he found himself thinking stupidly, *this is too much—too much of a miracle to ask for.*

*You're a fool, then.*

He hit but did not stop falling. He had hit the bottom? *A* bottom? The cliff's base? An outcropping?

It was horrible. He remained conscious; he remained surprisingly aware.

His left arm snapped from its socket, and the rocks stripped the flesh from tendons and bones. His clavicle fractured, the periosteum shrieking. His spine bent, dissolving discs, grinding, fracturing vertebrae, the thick bones screaming like a single white-hot rod inserted in him.

Then shock.... The larger vessels of his body dilated. The blood began to pool. His heart would soon starve.

He hit again, fully this time, right tibia fracturing transversely, bone tearing through flesh, fibula bowing but holding, foot and ankle waving free. Then his chest—ribs caving in, the pleural sac penetrated, lungs collapsing instantly and completely in a perfect twin pneumothorax.

And then his skull—like jaws tearing the back of it off—a craniocerebral invasion that felt as though light were being let in, and with it voices, a voice of light and pain and eternal hell.

When his body finally came to rest, the location did not matter. He was struggling to remain conscious. His body was five or six bodies, five or six different islands of pain.

He remained aware. The diagnoses floated in his head with clairvoyant ease. The damage was only beginning.

His eyes were staring—though at what he couldn't have said. His pupils were dilated. His pulse was fast and weak. He was as pale as the sand, and small parts of him were as blue as the cove. His lips, earlobes, fingernails and fingertips had turned cyanotic long ago, but the blue was covered with red blood. His circulatory system was collapsing. The blood was standing in his vessels; the heart did not have enough—not enough blood, not enough oxygen—but his deflated lungs had no oxygen to send it anyway. He was bleeding from the mouth and ears, and he could feel his heart fibrillating, near congestive failure.

Through the tide that called him toward death, he felt something move at one end of his body.

It was, he realized, only his foot and ankle flipping over, the tendons pulling them free of the rock, back into place, into alignment with the knee. Not a miracle.



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He was going to die.

He was going to *let himself* die.

He couldn't even keep himself from dying.

He gave up. It didn't matter. None of it did. Sleepily, and deafer now to the shrieks of pain and light in his skull, he found himself wondering why he's ever bothered to struggle, ever bothered trying to remember....

He gave up. He allowed himself to die.

And as he did—because he did—the block began to dissolve away.

*Dead, he could not hold it in place.*

*Dead, he could no longer escape the pain of knowing—*

*—the remembering who he was—*

*—of remembering for eternity.*

He remembered it all, and it was more than he could have imagined, more than doctors or priests or zealots or clairvoyants, more than anything mortal.

He understood why he'd tried to forget, why anyone—mortal or other—would have tried to forget. He did not blame himself for trying, or for failing. Had he been able to heal the villagers, and at the same time been able to forget who he was, he'd have succeeded—for years, for decades, perhaps centuries...a respite, albeit brief, from the horror.

But it had not worked: He could not forget, and still heal.

And the irony was too great. It had not been mere accident; he could sense another's hand in this *He watches forever. World without end.*

Dead now, he was again who he was, again what he was.

Dead, he could heal that which needed healing.

It was simple and there was no question that he should do it. The work was not yet over. The body was a tool. It needed healing.

He aligned the tibia. He repaired the muscle sheths, tendons and skin, and sent an electrical current no stronger than a salamander's brain outward from the medullary canal, out through the periostea, the minerals and honeycomb of living cells. Slowly the bone fused.

He stood up on the leg. It held. He took a step. It worked perfectly.

The arm still dangled, dripping clots of blood.

He gave it new flesh, molding it like clay, and with one smooth motion returned it to its socket.

Light still entered the back of his skull. He took calcium and phosphorus from the *murexes, turitellas* and pelicypods of the cove's sandy bottom and filled in the missing bone. He restored the inches of cortex removed by the rocks now lying among the skull fragments twenty feet away, and recast the membrane, added skin, follicles, and made his oily hair grow again, slowly, steadily until it had reached the shoulders.



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When he was finished, he looked down at his shredded suit, at the blood splattered like red paint over the rocks. His eyes moved oddly, slowly, unblinkingly.

They were not human eyes now.

They glowed, burning with a fire that flickered like tongues, burning with the light of a Voice, an understanding, pain, guilt.

He took a step toward the water. The legs worked. The spine worked. He took more steps, entered the water, felt its coolness pull at the shreds of his suit, and began to move his arms, to swim through the congested waves.

It took him an hour to round the jetty and reach the bay. He left the water on the quiet side of the jetty—unobserved and not at all tired.

No one would see the burning of his eyes. He could make sure of this. Just as no one would hear the shrieking that filled him now. *World without end, amen.*

They would notice only his face—the face that was hauntingly familiar.

He began to walk toward the village called Pozzuoli.

Even without looking at it, he knew it was the correct door. Within a week a red hammer-and-sickle would appear over it, and it would at last resemble all the others. For now, it did not. This held no significance. It was a coincidence, nothing more.

He went in, into the damp darkness where two old women in black were weeping by the bedside of the old woman he had come for.

He healed her. He healed her from the center. He took the organs that had suffered last and healed them first, the ancient brain, the arythmic heart, the wine-tired liver. He made them stronger than they had ever been, because they had been so weak.

When he was finished, he looked down at her. She was breathing freely now though her eyes were still closed. She was not even aware that he had entered the room.

Should he make the air of the room, or her own blood pressure, wake her? It would help the stories, would it not? Were the old woman to look up at him now and see his shredded suit glowing like the feathers of an angel in her dark room, her story would be a moving one, the source of legends.

But he did not wake her. She should not shape it too much. He must beware of vanity, impatience, of greed.

The story told by the two other women in the room would be strong enough, the blood of legends. They would agree that the face was familiar, that they'd seen it in a painting.

Four doorways away he stepped in and healed a boy's arm shrunken by polio he had contracted from a restroom in the Scuola Civica. He healed as well, the boy's lungs, which held the



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fibrous tissue of tuberculosis, the tubercule microbes imprisoned in scar tissue and lime salts, but fated to break free and kill him before he reached thirty.

When the boy's uncle saw the healed arm—and truly believed what he saw—his own heart failed him, a myocardial infarction over the scars of other infarctions; and he had to heal the uncle too, helping him to his feet again so that he might see the foreigner in his strange blood-dappled suit, and remember him very clearly.

The uncle was a creative man. He would describe how an amber light and a soft chorus of voices surrounded the man with the sad eyes when he came to heal his nephew, and how, in his torn and bloody suit, this humble man looked as though he had just risen from a grave.

He healed Musetti Antonio, the hunchback who lived in the cinder-block shack at the end of Via Sant'Erasmo, who was lordotic and scoliotic both, who liked to fish, who liked to drink, who'd always lived alone. The foreigner appeared before him, but the hunchback was a man of few words, and the legend would begin instead from the lips of the fishermen who would, later that day, watch Tonio approach them on the mall—upright, perfectly balanced, and sober.

And he healed the daughter of the convent grounds manager, a pretty girl with cow eyes and, although no one knew it, lymphatic cancer, too. And no one ever would. He healed her harelip as well, and this they would see; this, the tiny miracle, a feat any hospital could have achieved, would be the miracle that followed him.

He took the familiar gravel road back to the hotel.

The concierge had been right, of course. He would be leaving tomorrow. Tonight the La Spezia newspaper —and the next day the national *Corriere della Serra* — would have the news, would know of this town's miracles.

The villagers had been superstitious. Like all mortals, they were afraid of losing the grace, the blessing, the magic, by talking about it too much, by taking its name in vain, and so they had kept the miracles to themselves. Not even the concierge, a member of another class, had heard of the events.

But this evening word would get out. The man who ran the small stationery store for Scuola Civica students would, this very evening, take the jolting bus to La Spezia. He would meet his cousin for drinks. They would drink with a man whose sister sold advertising space for the La Spezia *Luce del Golfo*.

He would leave early tomorrow—before the journalists could find him. He had to leave. Legends depended on people who disappeared—by death, martyrdom, inexplicable de-



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parture—even resurrection, if need be.

He would be gone tomorrow, but the next day, the very next, he would appear in another village—two or five or seven hundred kilometers away. There, the miracles would begin again.

And there would be no record of his journey.

The gravel road began to curve, and he recognized the bend.

As he approached the rock, he knew that the small green body would still be there. A bird had found it—working on the eyes before leaving it to the ants, which trailed like black threads down the side of the rock—and the body was shrunken, the bones pronounced. But it was still there.

He stared at it, and behind his eyes, in the darkness, in the fires, compassion flickered like cool water, and softened the pain of memory. For a moment the shrieking—the guilt, the horror of what he had done so long ago against the Voice, the Other—was again muted.

He wanted it to live.

The small green body rolled over suddenly, raised up on its forelegs, and lowered itself back down again. The skull was smooth, no longer distorted. The ribs and spine no longer showed under the skin.

The lids blinked at him. The tongue darted out once as though tasting the compassion.

He did not look at it again.

The miracle was over, and the voices had returned. The shrieking, the fire, the endless night, were in his skull again.

He closed his eyes and found the man whose shoulder had taken the bullet when the gun went off in his hotel room. He healed him while a nurse was changing the bandage. She cried out, crossed herself and began to weep as though she'd known and loved the man for years.

Again the voices and the fire softened.

He kept his eyes closed and sent his hand to the woman with the ulcerated ankle who had been on his bed with her dying daughter. He healed her while her husband stared at the floor. Distracted by sorrow and memories, the man would not notice what had happened for almost an hour.

He kept his eyes closed, and with one pass over the village, the bay and hills, disturbed the protein synthesis and cell-wall growth of a trillion microbes, and cleansed the village of every *pestis* organism in it.

Eyes still closed, he located the body of the spindly girl where she lay in the darkness of the earth, and as he did, he knelt down on the gravel, which pressed into him like thorns.

This would consume him, he knew. It would demand more of him than all the others together.

Three kilometers away, in the small cemetery by the highway to Livorno and Pisa, the girl was making her way up through the earth, pounding and shattering the casket with her bare



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hands, breaking her bones as she did, scraping her flesh raw as she clawed up through the earth.

He did not let her breathe yet. He did not want dirt in her lungs.

When she was free of the ground, wobbling and staggering without consciousness across the grass, he let her breathe at last, and healed her hands, her raw flesh, and cleansed the embalming fluids from her body.

He did not wash the dirt from her hair and face and dress. Her family would have to do this. He could not, should not, shape all of it.

When she found the road that would lead her home, he left her.

He got up. For the half hour the girl had needed to escape her grave, his own pain—the fire, the shrieks, the guilt—had been softer.

They returned now, as he'd known they would.

He resumed his walk toward the hotel.

The girl would be his greatest legend. She would reverberate througout the country. The whole village would be interrogated by the world. Emissaries from the Vatican would arrive, and stay for months. Journalists from the continent would make this the third largest story of the year.

Like the other miracles, it would bring many people closer to believing. It would bring so many of them back—

—to the Voice—

—*who are in heaven.*

And seeing this—the legends, all the bodies brought back—perhaps the Voice, the voice in his nightmare, the one he had lived with since the beginning of time, would at last forgive him for his part in the rebellion, would at last see in him the son who never wanted to fall, who never should have fallen.

He would change his face, of course. For each village it would be a slightly different one, all of them hauntingly familiar, but each a little different. And he would not run out of faces. This country alone—with its museums full of works by Giotto, Bellini, Castagno, della Francesca, Tintoretto, da Vinci, Buonarotti, all the others—had enough to last him for millennia, all of them faces that mortals could indeed expect miracles from.

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*Remember the household pet? Hard to believe there were times when spaniels, retrievers, cats, even chickens, roamed at will through the backyards of America. Here, thanks to scholar John Kessel, is a fresh look at one of the most prophetic sf classics of the 50s.*

# The Monuments of Science Fiction

BY JOHN KESSEL

*Chapter 3: Those Fabulous 50's*

## INTRODUCTION:

One of the major techniques of 1950's science fiction was *extrapolation.* In the typical extrapolative science fiction story, the author takes some present-day trend and extends it into the future, then looks at the consequences of this projection. As practiced by masters like Pohl, Kornbluth, Leiber and Winkler in the pages of *Galaxy Science Fiction*, the extrapolative story offered an unexampled means of cautionary social criticism. Reading these tales today, we are often amazed at the accuracy of their predictions. This is what sf is all about.

"Starship Nurse of the Pecos and the Locked Room Murder of Hellwood Hall" first appeared in *Galaxy* in 1954. The Science Fiction Writers of America have voted Winkler's story one of the ten best social sf stories of all time. For this special critical volume, the extant magazine version has been collated against Winkler's original manuscript by his literary executor, the noted academic critic John Joseph Kessel.

## *STARSHIP NURSE OF THE PECOS AND THE LOCKED ROOM MURDER OF HELLWOOD HALL*

by V.H. Winkler

He hauled back with the sledgehammer and pulped the mewling kitten's head against the floor. The dawn was just coming up through the eye-level basement windows; a pale shaft of light, lancing through the gloom, made a patch of brightness on the wall directly above the animal's oozing corpse. *A sign,* Jim Tapwater thought.



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"Did you get him?" Betty's nervous voice from the top of the stairs.

"Of course I got him!" Tapwater was annoyed at having to get out of bed early for a mere kitten; he'd expected at least a Class III stray, maybe even a Rex. He shivered at the cold air seeping into the basement through the broken window. That was how the damned thing'd gotten in. The wire mesh was torn away: Jim jammed a piece of masonite from his workbench into the window well. Jesus, his hands were cold!

It was no use trying to go back to sleep then. Betty heated some yeastcakes and plastibacon while Jim put down two cups of burnt-barley "coffee." He listened to the morning radio report; nothing new. Two teenagers out necking in Sumner Park, torn up by a starving dogpack. The boy was dead, the girl in critical. It was getting to seem like they'd never clean up the Southeast area. There had to be two, three hundred dogs, most of them Dobermans, shepherds, just in the park.

Betty talked at him about Christmas shopping and the relatives; Jim stared at the dregs at the bottom of his cup. Suddenly the phone rang. She jumped up to get it.

"It's PECOS, Jim. They've got a problem down at the university."

Daddy bought Suzie a puppy for her birthday. The puppy grew up and ran through the neighborhood, a delight to the whole family. He made many neighborhood dogs into mothers. The children of Suzie's puppy and the other dogs were given away to relatives and strangers or sent to the animal shelter. Some of them died. Some of them were neglected and became strays. Most of them lived long enough to become mothers and fathers themselves, of other cute little puppies. Hundreds of them. And these hundreds of little mutts grew up in their own good (rapid) time, and bore more puppies, and so on unto the nth generation.

Next door to Suzie lived Dawn, and Dawn's daddy bought her a kitty....

Forty years later Jim Tapwater was born, and by that time no one gave his child a puppy or a kitty. And no one left his child alone in the back yard, because of the stories you heard about how one of those damned strays had attacked a baby and....

By the time Jim was six, his mom and dad had taken to wearing sidearms and shooting animals on sight...

When Jim was fifteen, the national government started to break down (but that's another story).

When Jim was seventeen, he joined the newly formed Omicron Sector of the Pet Elimination Corps and spent four years at the PECOS Academy in Terre Haute, Indiana, learning the latest methods of selective extermination of wild dogs, cats, hamsters, gerbils, tiny turtles, goldfish, parakeets,



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rats (rats?) and ducks. He graduated in the top five percent of a class that desperately drew on the brightest and most dedicated youths of their generation, enlisted in the brightest and most desperate cause of American history: the mortal struggle to wrest control of the land from an estimated nine billion savage, ruthless pests which had once been man's best friends, the comfort of the aged, the companions of the hearth, the best of show. It was a call to idealism that, at seventeen, few youths had felt more strongly than Jim Tapwater. But idealism does not last.

The brightness was gone, Jim thought to himself as he drove the Studebaker Electrocoupe through the shabby and deserted streets. Only the desperation remained. The fifteen years in the Corps that had seen him rise to command rank — the patches at the shoulder of his olive-drab uniform indicated he was a Senior Medical Detective on the Starshift — had also seen his marriage turn sour and his ambition buried in a heap of bureaucratic details and cat litter. Six, seven hundred thousand animals he must have been responsible for eliminating, he thought, *seven hundred thousand of the filthy suckers* — and who knows how many lives saved, how many trees preserved, how many tons of fecal material he had prevented — *prevented* — from stinking up the godforsaken world! For what?

Jim jerked the wheel hard to the right to avoid the corpse of a Great Dane that lay rotting in the street. A roverbot had probably smashed him days before, but you could count on the public not to call a cleanup detail. Damnfool civilians never did a thing to prevent this problem, then complained on the first warm day that the stench was too great for them to bear. They'd have to get used to stenches if this kept up — and it wouldn't be just dogs that would lie rotting in the streets. He smiled grimly and adjusted his nose-filters.

That was the heart of his discontent. He's been trying to ignore it, to avoid having to face it down for over a year now. They were losing the battle. All the effort, all the men lost, all the stinking, soul-grinding work, and they were still losing. If no breakthrough was made in R&D, they'd have maybe eight or ten years before the land of the free and the home of the brave was one giant litterbox, from sea to shining sea. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

The Studebaker hummed past the barriers into the business district. Here there was comparative safety, if you didn't know the facts. Jim knew, however, that the gray-suited financiers, the right-thinking American Truehearts, were no safer here than a libertarian in commie Russia. The dangers were only more subtle than in the no-man's-land of the suburbs. Still, the city *looked* more lively here. There were pedestrians on the sidewalks, earlybird women out shopping in these last days before the holidays, and


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numerous cars in the streets. Christmas ads flashed from streetside glowsigns: "The gift that keeps on Giving — industrial diamonds"; "Starlight Lounge: Simon DoVideo and his Big Band"; "Poochyfeed Poison Yummies, with Giblet Gravy"; "The Clean Home, the *Odorfree*™ Home." Streetcorner Santas rang their bells. It looked very normal for such an early morning — but when he stopped for a light, Jim saw that the jolly, red-clad men carried hand stunners clipped to their belts. Smart Santas.

He pulled into the parking lot behind the Joseph McCarthy Building — PECOS headquarters. He was out of the car, turning his collar up against the cold as he walked toward the security entrance, when he saw smoke pouring out from under the hood of one of the parked cars. There was someone beating on the windows, trying to get out!

Fifteen years with PECOS had not dulled his reflexes. Jim ran over to the car — a DeSoto Eisenhower — waved the woman back from the glass, and kicked in the window with his booted foot. It took him just three blows. He reached in, grabbed the door handle and yanked it open, then snatched the woman's wrist and half dragged her out. She was blonde, and had a figure that would poach an egg.

"Are you all right?" he asked. Her eyes were violet. Her breasts heaved with excitement.

"I—I think so." She had a voice to match her body: thrilling, upholstered.

By that time Willis, the colored man who swept out the security entrance, had come out to the car. Smoke was still billowing out through the grille and from around the edges of the hood. There was an acrid, burnt-wiring smell to it.

"What y'all think's the mattah, Mistah Tapwatah?" the clean old Negro asked.

"We'll soon find out." Jim cautiously slipped his hand under the front chrome, tripped the hoodlatch and opened her up. More smoke clouded up, then dissipated. "No fire problem," he said tersely.

"What was it?" the blonde asked. She'd already calmed down. She was good.

He poked through the scorched wiring. "Chicks. You got a nest of baby chicks in here. Probably crawled in last night, in the cold, and rode all the way into town with you. You're lucky they didn't short you out earlier. You're going to need a new coil." He waved away the last of the smoke and closed the hood.

"Ah dassn't stay out heah too long, Mistah Tapwatah." The old man shuffled from foot to foot. He'd been a model employee ever since his political re-education. A little slower, though.

"Right, Willis. You go along. We'll come in in a minute."

"I have to thank you for helping me," the girl said. "I don't know why I couldn't get the door opened."


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"Don't mention it." Jim grinned, and they walked together into the building. "What's your name?"

"Doris ... Doris Blackwell. I'm the new assistant nurse on the Starshift." He saw her glance at his insignia. "That's your outfit?" Her voice was noncommittal, but Jim thought he heard an invitation beneath it. It certainly looked as though the woman inside those starched nurse's whites could offer him more togetherness than he was getting from Betty. And Doris's steady violet eyes told him there was some grit behind her beauty.

"That's right," he said finally. "You'll be working under me."

He recalled the reason he was there. "Did Ike call you about this business out at the university?"

"Yes."

"Well, let's get cracking. Probably been a hundred animals born while we've been talking here." He grinned at her again.

Ike Hertz was a big, gruff man, with iron-gray hair cut to a short, military brush. He'd been in the navy back when the Reds had launched an all-out on Quemoy and Matsu in '92, and had fought alongside the hundred-year-old General Chiang Kai-shek's armies through the whole Yangtze campaign. Now, thirty years later, he was still fond of quoting the General's sayings. He was briefing them on the way out to the university in the PECOS Starshift Attack Van.

"General Chiang always said," Ike gestured with his cigar at the six men and women crowded into the van's rear, "that the difference between murder and war is a matter of public policy." He paused to let the import of his words sink in. "Now what we've got here may *look* like a murder — but Doctor Victor Dunklepopulos was doing top-secret work for PECOS. So what looks like an everyday crime of violence to these egghead fellowtravelers at the university, is to *us* — PECOS, the FBI, and the CIA — an act of war. But whose war is it? And how was it done?"

Jim arched his back and stretched. Doris sat beside him, hanging on Hertz's incisive words. She had told him more about herself, and it looked like they could get along *very* well together. But first there was their job.

"These are the facts," Hertz continued. "At 8:45 last night Dr. Dunklepopulos entered Hellwood Hall — the Physics building — and informed the security man from Military Intelligence that he was going to work in his lab. Pursuant to normal security procedure, the MI operatives sealed the laboratory entrance after the doctor went in. An armed guard was present at all times after Dr. Dunklepopulos entered. There are no other entrances or exits to the lab. All heating and ventilation ducts were under tamper-proof security alarms," Hertz stopped, took a long pull on his cigar; the end glowed cherry red, and



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he looked into the eyes of each of his listeners.

"At three o'clock this morning a security man entered the lab to ask whether Dr. Dunklepopulos would like something to eat. He found the doctor lying in a pool of his own blood in the cleared space before his apparatus. His throat was torn open and bore the marks of attack by some sort of large animal. There was no animal in the lab. There is no possibility that any *man*, let alone some savage beast, could have entered Hellwood Hall without detection. And — *and* — Dr. Dunklepopulos had recently let it be known that he was working on a technique that would eliminate the stray pet problem and save these Reunited States of America.

"It is up to us, ladies and gentlemen, to find out what happened to Victor Dunklepopulos last night — and more importantly — you all know how *much* more importantly — to discover just what it was he had found that he thought would preserve our Stars and Stripes. *Forever!*"

When they got to the university, the team spread out through the laboratory and Hellwood Hall, an aggressively modern building in the old 1980s style. Hertz conferred with the police medical examiner, the FBI agents, and the PECOS investigators already on the scene. Then he called Jim over.

"They tell me there's another physicist here who may know something about Dunklepopulos's experiment. His name's Benjamin Epstein, and they're holding him in Dunklepopulous's office here for questioning. I want you to be there."

The office occupied a glassed-in corner of the lab. Looking out through the windows, Jim could watch Doris and the others examining the site of the murder. He nodded to her, but he didn't think she saw him.

Benjamin Epstein wore the traditional baggy woolens of a Highland's Jew and spoke with a soft burr. The fact that he was not a native American had already put him on several lists of potential subversives. His family, he admitted readily, had moved to the new Jewish homeland the British had set up in Scotland in '67 when the Arabs had evicted the Israelis from Palestine. He had grown up on a *kibbutz* near Balmoral, in the shadow of big Ben MacDhui, and had migrated to the USA after the abortive Scots-Israeli war of 2002. His specialty was low-temperature physics.

Hertz was his competent self. "All right, Professor Epstein, cooperate and we can make this short and sweet. How well did you know Victor Dunklepopulos?"

"I hae known him since I came to the university. Professionally. We waerna the best of friends, I can tell you." The little man threw them a dark, uncertain look. "I haedna anythin' against him, you unnerstand; we ware jest not friends, is all."



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Hertz shot Jim a significant glance. He proceeded clamly. "Just so. Why was it that your were *not* friends? Be frank, now."

The swarthy Highlander began to look nervous. "You dinna unnerstand the way the profession works, gentlemen. I am in my speciality; he is in his." He spread his hands about a foot apart in front of him. "The twa disciplines waer not sae related as you maught imagine, and the twain dinna meet sae often. Donklepoopuloos was working in field manipulation — I am in low temperatures." He hesitated as if he were calculating just how much he could say, then added. "Besides, he was a *goy*." He muttered something about "schmucks" under his breath.

"What do you know about the experiments he was conducting?" Jim snapped suddenly.

The man's reply was guarded. "Victor haed tauld me he was making use of sooperconductors. He was a saecretive man, gentlemen. I gathered — and this is jest an empression, mind you — that he was attemptin' something in the way of manipulation of gravitational fields."

Hertz's eyes lit up. "Antigravity, huh? This could be it!" He walked over behind Epstein's chair and rested a friendly hand on the physicist's shoulder. Ike's entire manner had changed, relaxed — but Jim could see the steel-trap mind waiting to spring beneath cool gray eyes.

"That's all I think we need to ask you, Professor," Hertz said. The semitic Scot rose and walked to the door. Hertz nailed him just as he reached for the doorknob. "Just one more thing, *Epstein* ... we know about your record. Don't think you're putting anything over on us. I can smell a parlor petkeeper a mile away!"

Epstein turned to face them. His lip quivered.

"Yeah, Epstein, we know about that *sheepdog* in your basement. And the gerbils! We've known a long time all about your dirty little habits, ever since you made that mistake with the shetland pony. And now it's going to catch up with you." He nodded to one of the FBI agents. "Take him in, Stewart. We'll find out the truth down in the PECOS Visitors' Lounge."

"Not that!" the fiery low-temperature man shouted as the agents grabbed his arms. "You dinna unnerstand! I haed nothing to do wi' this!" Jim could still see him shouting and hear his muffled voice after the door closed.

"We'll scrape the pile out of this carpet in short order, Tapwater," Ike said. "I'm going along to be in on the grilling. I want you and one of the others to stay here and make sure nothing is touched. I'll let you know when Epstein cracks."

He strode aggressively out of the office.

Jim chose Doris Blackwell as his assistant. He chased the other agents and



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hangers-on out of the lab and told them to keep an eye on the area and to enter only in the event of an emergency. Then he and Doris went to work, testing and retesting for pawprints, noting in the fieldbook the precise size and shape of everything in the room. As they worked they made small talk, and Jim pondered the facts of the case.

Antigravity. If that was what Dunklepopulos was onto, you could see why he was an important man. Important enough to be killed. Antigravity could possibly be the answer to the pet problem, either through the forcible projection of strays into space (which would call for some kind of amazing selectivity) or through human colonization of new worlds. But what about Epstein? Was he in the employ of a foreign pawer? The Red Dogmasters? And more puzzling still — it suddenly hit him, shockingly, that Hertz had neglected to consider this — how the hell had he committed the crime anyway? When he hadn't been in the building at the time but instead, according to surveillance, had been with Andrea Dorian, Dean of Women. Jim had examined the wounds on Dunklepopulos's neck himself, before they took him to the morgue, and had decided that, if they were caused by a large cat or dog, it had to be an animal with an oral configuration drastically different from any he had encountered in the past. And how had Epstein, presuming he had such a ravenous beast, snuck it into the lab? How had he gotten it out? The questions, once admitted, multiplied like hamsters.

"I think I'm done here," Doris said. She was bending over a lab bench toward him, brushing away some fingerprint dust, and her unbuttoned tunic revealed her firm, milk-white breasts.

"What-say we take a break, Doris. There's not much left to do."

"Okay."

They sat down on the cot that the unfortunate Dunklepopulos had kept there for nights when he was working late. They talked for a while, and then, what with one thing and another — a little boredom, a little loneliness, a little close physical proximity — Jim found himself holding her tightly while she fumbled with the buttons at the front of his uniform. The guards outside would not be coming in...she seemed extremely willing, even for a nurse...

...football, he thought...basketball, dribbling down-court and around a pick into the clear put up a shot! ... cold weather, snow, piling up outside, so cold you could hardly move...yes, don't move...cars, speeding along until you came to the tollgate...tolls, money vending machine, put your coin in the...candy bar wrapper, scraps of drafting paper at the Academy when you used a T-square and number-four drawing pencil for straight, straight lines, oh, straight...oh, oh...how straight the lines...were.

After a while he somewhat return-



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ed to himself. She lay very warm beside him, half in and half out of the uniform. Jim gazed absently across the chilly lab toward the professor's mysterious apparatus. That was where he'd been killed. From this angle the tall, slender network of electronic components around a long elliptical aluminum ring, wired with heavy cables to a bank of switches, transformers, circuit boards — looked a little like a door. An elliptical doorway of electronic spaghetti. As Jim watched, slowly the area inside the ring began to become misty. In his groggy state he at first registered nothing more than curiosity. The opaqueness grew, a kind of yellow dullness, reflecting nothing, until after a minute or so the area inside the aluminum ring looked like it was covered by a flat, mustard-colored sheet of paper, and you could not see the wall behind it.

In an instant, curiosity became alarm — became terror.

A black, hairy leg, then an arm, then an entire semihuman *body* stepped through the ovoid. An ape! Jim struggled to sit up. Doris stirred and lifted her head to see what was going on. Yet it wasn't exactly an ape, Jim saw in the split second before the attack came — something of the musculature, the gait was wrong. And this moment of calm observation departed as quickly as the money in a charge account when the beast saw them and, with an insane glare, a low growl of mindless brutality, charged them!

Jim was halfway to his feet, tugging up on his trousers, when the ape in its mad rush hit him full in the chest and sent him reeling back into Doris on the cot, to strike his head on the wall behind them. Stunned, he tried to roll to the side, but the beast had already torn an inch-deep gash in his shoulder with his claws, and was snarling at his throat through razor fangs. To her credit, Doris did not scream. Jim couldn't tell what she was doing; he was busy trying to keep the beast from tearing him to pieces — one good swipe at his neck with either the claws *or* the fangs, and his carotid would be severed, his life flown away!

He felt the beast's hot and stinking breath in his face, saw the furious black mask inches from his nose. His one advantage was weight — apparently the thing weighed only 140 or 150 pounds. The blood from his shoulder made grasping slimy and unfirm. Just when he thought it was all over — only seconds after it had begun — he felt his foot strike some solid object. In desperation he pushed out with all his remaining strength. Both of them flipped off the cot onto the floor; pulling forward suddenly on the ape's arms and muzzle instead of pushing away, he threw the thing into a somersault. The beast landed on its shoulders and its back slammed into a laboratory bench. It was only momentarily dazed, but in that moment Doris, still half naked, hit it in the midriff with a chair. Jim struggled to his feet while the ape


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was still down, took the chair from Doris, and jammed it legs-first into the creature's face. One of the legs caught it in an eyesocket. The beast gave one convulsive shudder, and was still.

Two security men at last ran into the room. "Oh, Jim!" Doris gasped, falling into his arms.

"All in a day's work," Tapwater replied.

Doris had just finished bandaging Jim's arm and shoulder when Ike Hertz arrived. Sitting in Dunklepopulos's glassed-in office, they watched a couple of FBI men poke at the corpse of an ape with a chair through its eye. Finally Hertz broke the silence.

"So what's the story, Jim? Epstein might just as well have been a hula hoop, for all we got out of him."

Jim leaned forward in the chair and looked up at Ike. "Well, we know what killed Dunklepopulos — an ape. And we know how it got in and out without being detected. And now, I guess, we know what the professor was working on, too."

"Quit the guessing games, Jim. I want the straight poop."

"Okay," Jim grinned. "The key is Dunklepopulos's experiment. It wasn't gravity control he was working on — though, for all I know, that might have something to do with it. It was *dimensional* control. That machine there..." Jim gestured with his good arm at the apparatus visible through the glass, "...is a device to puncture the fabric of our universe, to put us in contact with another, parallel world. It's a dimensional doorway."

"How can you be sure?" Doris asked.

"What's the alternative?" Jim got up, strode over to the glass, and turned to them. "When you've eliminated the dumb answers, whatever remains, however unlikely, must be un-dumb."

"Smart thinking, Jimbo." Hertz lit a cigar.

"Dunklepopulos must have been trying out his device here last night," Jim continued, "when he accidentally transported one of these wild creatures, from what must be a very primitive world, to our own. The ape promptly tore the good doctor to shreds, then blundered back into its own world. And none of us the wiser."

Doris whistled lowly. "And that's how we'll solve the pet problem! Ship them all off to this other world!"

Jim flashed her a smile. "Right. And I'll just bet if we do a little investigating, we'll find that Dunklepopulos had developed a way to make the process species-specific, so we can project the pests without accidentally sending people."

"*Unless*," Hertz added, "they're racially undesirable. This sounds real good — I think we can get a program going in short order, now that there's a way out...but I guess that means we'll have to let this Epstein fellow go. Seems a pity."


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Doris's eyes lit up. "Book him on the petkeeper charges. Get the right judge and he won't see daylight for forty years."

"You got it, kiddo!" Hertz chortled. "I think you're both due for promotions." The tip of his cigar once more glowed cherry red.

Jim rested his back against the cool glass, minding his own gentle thoughts. Doris was going to be good for him. And, he realized happily, if Betty grew to be too much of a problem, — Dunklepopulos's invention could eliminate more than one kind of meddlesome bitch.

But one question still gnawed at the roots of his contentment. If Dunklepopulos had accidentally brought through the beast that had killed him, then *how*, when the machine wasn't even operating, had the second ape come to attack them in the lab? Could it be that there was a parallel *civilization* on the other side, in a parallel state of development? People who could open their own dimensional portal? To solve social problems that were likewise parallel to our own?

It was a sobering thought, but not one suitable to the joyous occasion. So with some relief Jim turned to thoughts of Doris and the days to come. He looked at Hertz's gruff smile; he saw Doris's seductive one. And had he not had his back to the window, he would also have seen coming through the portal the first three of the great plague of pestiferous apes that have entirely usurped the surface of our poor earth.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION:

1) Why is there a starship in the title when there is none in the story?

2) What does Winkler think he is trying to warn us against?

3) Make a list of the predictions in this story that have come true. Which of those that have not do you think will eventually? Do you have a dog?

4) If you met Benjamin Epstein in the street, would you shake his hand? Think again.

5) Why do you think Winkler placed the PECOS Academy in Terre Haute? Where *is* Terre Haute?

6) In science fiction, we often find nurses who are "easy." Why do you think this is so?

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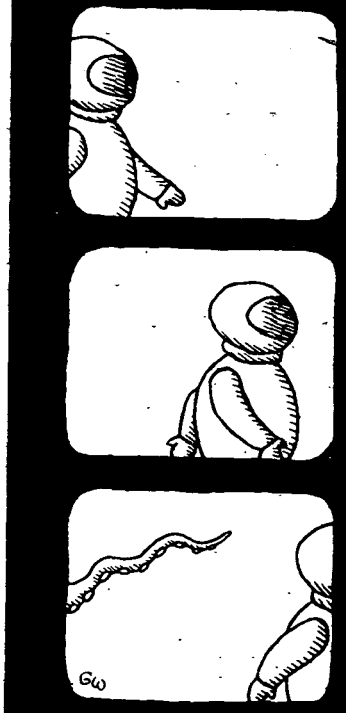
# Films

## BAIRD SEARLES




## THE RETURN OF THE WHAT?

After so many years of often having to search for something to review, the sudden spate of s/f and fantasy films means that I am sometimes lately flooded with material to write about. I am still enough aware of former deprivation to be tempted to squirrel away a movie or two for possible lean months upcoming, but what the hell! Let's blow it all and talk about three movies this time.

They're all losers, alas; one is a brave (not-so-new) try, one is just plain insipid, and one is a thoroughgoing disaster from every point of view.

The good-try-there award goes to the three hour (with commercials) film adaptation of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Again, as with *The Lathe of Heaven* and *The Martian Chronicles*, we have the transferral to screen of a respectable, literate book. But unlike those two, and even with uneven acting, uninspired direction, and a pretty dull production, the major problems here lie directly with the novel.

Frankly, I've always despised *Brave New World*. When I read it many years ago, it seemed to me the perfect example of the mainstream author rather condescendingly using the stuff of science fiction to manufacture an allegory for our times. This describes some of the best works in the field, of course (Stapledon, Wells, et al.), but



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it's usually badly done. In short, *Brave New World* is the kind of book assigned to science fiction courses by teachers who know nothing about science fiction.

In the movie, all of this preachiness came across, as well as an extraordinarily dated premise.

Huxley's major cautionary point was the use of genetic engineering and assembly line, "test tube" births. This results in a perverted future society of physical and intellectual castes wherein anyone with the moral sensibilities of our time is persecuted as anti-social. Unfortunately, for "our time," read the 1930s. Already we have moved toward certain aspects of the brave, new world; Huxley's attitudes toward sex and death for instance (monogamy and pietism), seem downright unhealthy in the '70s, and even in smaller matters, the philosophy is hopelessly outdated, as in the condemnation of the "feelies" of the future. Huxley was obviously equating them with the movies; the attitude reflected was that of the '30s intellectual toward cinema, as a hopelessly crude entertainment involving neither art nor technique.

All of this showed up faithfully on the screen; I'm surprised no one noticed it on the way to production, but I guess they figured that futuristic settings and body-stocking costumes would disguise the fact that it should have been decorated with art deco and dressed in '30s prints.

Our just-plain-insipid rating goes to a made-for-TV effort with the inspired title of *The Aliens Are Coming*. Since a certain movie that shall remain nameless, the word "alien" does not mean an individual from another culture, race or species. It means mean, and you can be sure that anything dubbed an alien in current masscult is going to be unpleasant physically, intellectually and morally.

This particular lot arrives in a disc-shaped ship, and proceeds to try to take over Earthlings, which they accomplish by mere contact and a lot of bluish polarization.

I don't think you need know much more about this lame effort save that the aliens are foiled, but only partially, which lays the groundwork for a whole series. Don't say I didn't warn you.

Now for the wholesale-disaster award which of course goes to the recently-TV'd *The Return of the King*. At least I think it will have been recently shown when this sees print; I saw it at a fairly far up front screening, and there's always the chance that someone at ABC will have looked at it before it's broadcast.

This *Return of the King* is a "sequel" to the Rankin/Bass production of *The Hobbit* which we were assaulted by some years ago on TV. In between there came the Ralph Bakshi-directed movie, *The Lord of the Rings*, which covered, more or less, the first book-and-a-half of the trilogy. The

*(turn to page 157)*



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*The relentless work and expense of renovating an old house has broken many a strong man and woman, but here is an old house horror story to end them all — about Harold and Edna and their brownstone, which saps their lives in a mysterious and chilling fashion.*

# Real Estate

BY

## JERROLD MUNDIS

Harold found the first hundred dollars on the workbench in the basement. It was under a coffee can filled with old rusted 12-penny nails — a single bill, new, folded in half across the middle. It lay in the center of a thin rust circle left by the coffee can, which hadn't been moved in at least a year, maybe longer.

He picked it up between his thumb and forefinger. He turned it over, held it up to the light. It seemed to be real.

He made a pleased and baffled sound.

He couldn't remember having put it there, could not in fact remember when he'd last handled a hundred dollar bill. His life didn't often bring him into contact with currency of such denomination. He was not moved to question his good fortune. Rather, he tucked the bill into his wallet with some haste, as if to secure it before it could vanish.

He moved a jar of washers that had been beside the coffee can and looked under it. Then a paper sack of sheetrock nails, then a series of dull alloy cans from which the labels had been soaked and removed and which held nails, screws, bolts, nuts. He looked beneath an old cigar box filled with various pieces of hardware. He found a couple of dead roaches, some sawdust and an old gum wrapper.

He shrugged and went back to work, resentfully, on the faucet from Mrs. Jackson's bathroom sink, which he'd been promising her he would fix for the last five months.

He remembered that day, the day he found the first hundred dollars, because he'd heard on the radio in the morning that the city council had announced another rise in property taxes.



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"My God," he said bitterly. "They're going to kill us. We can't take any more, we just can't."

His wife Edna was sitting across the kitchen table carefully flexing her hands, trying to loosen the arthritic joints. She stopped. Her mouth began to frame words.

"No," he said. "I don't want to hear it. We can't afford to go anyplace else. The house is all we have. If we give it up, we won't have anything."

"But it costs us —"

"I told you I don't want to hear it. I've worked for this house half my life. And now, by God, it's going to work for me. What do you think we'd do for money without it? How do you think we'd have to live?"

She looked down at her coffee. "If we were someplace else," she said quietly, "maybe we wouldn't be so depressed. And if it were someplace drier or warmer, I could work more. The house brings in less each year. It's falling apart."

"It's going to pay me back for all those years. There's no point if it doesn't. We'd lose everything, our whole lives."

She didn't say anything more. They'd been having this conversation three or four years. Her words seemed only to make him more determined, and not just against her but against the house itself. It had become a balky animal he was going to make perform. At times he was almost frenzied about it. And when, in its age, some new portion failed, he raged at it and could think of nothing else for days. Last spring when the water pipe in Three-B burst and ruined the ceiling of the apartment below, he attacked the wall with a sledgehammer, as if he were beating the house, punishing it.

"I'm going to work now," he said.

He carried his breakfast dishes to the sink. He went into the hall and picked his windbreaker from a clothes hook and put it on. He stopped at the front door. Edna was in the kitchen entrance, watching him.

"It'll be all right," he said with a tenderness that had become infrequent over the last decade. "The house will take care of us. I'll see that it does."

She nodded.

He left, closing the door behind him. He walked up from the entrance well to the street level. The handrail was oxidizing and small flakes came off on his palm, discoloring it. The moorings were loose and the rail wobbled under his hand. The half-flight of stairs that led up from the sidewalk to the tenants' entrance were chipped and cracked. There wasn't much left of the first step, most of it having crumbled and broken away in the late 60s, abetted by vandals, one of whom had chucked a piece through a window.

The mass of the old brownstone settled on his shoulders as he started off down the sidewalk. He didn't look back at it, but still, its image rose in his mind with sharp clarity. He knew every crack and seam, every gouge,



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each peel of paint on the corbels up beneath the roof, each taped-up crack in the glass, rotting window frame. The house had become logged into his nervous system in all its aspects and pieces, as if in a computer, and any section could be flashed onto his mind-screen in a moment: a diagram of the wiring, a readout on the state of the roof tar, the memory of one nail among thousands, the one that had plunged with a single hammer blow deep into the dry rot of a basement joist.

He walked six blocks to the meat-market in which he had worked as a butcher for the last twenty years. The October sun was cheerful. But only in abstraction, high up in the empyrean, it was as if some enormous fine sieve lay over the city, or at least this part of it, filtering out each mote that could uplift the spirit or bring joy before it fell upon the streets, where it became nothing more than simple light. He passed an abandoned and plundered car on the way; a woman with a goiter rummaging in a trash can, several idle men sitting on stoops, some drinking from bottles in paper bags. He was aware of all this, but only peripherally, and without emotional response. They had been part of the environment so long that he didn't remember on a daily basis a time when it had been different.

But the pensioneers and dry old wispy hulks did bother him. Feeble, with papery skin and cloudy eyes and spotted hands, they shuffled and mumbled in front of the welfare hotels and rooming houses, they dozed on the benches on the dusty grassy medians of Lowery Avenue, they looked into store windows opening and closing their mouths like dying goldfish, walked in little mad circles. They bothered him because they were penniless and dying. They lived in tiny, lonely rooms. They didn't have enough to eat. They froze to death in the winter when the heat went out. They bothered him, they frightened him, because soon he and Edna could be like that. They were both so tired already. They couldn't work many years more. The house had to help them, had to pay them back.

He worked all day cutting meat and weighing it, wrapping it in brown paper. The day uneventful, as nearly all of them were. He preferred it that way. When the vicissitudes were broken, it was usually unhappy — an argument about prices, shouting or tears over foodstamps, a robbery. On the way home he stopped at a housewares store and bought a box of rubber washers and a little roll of teflon tape because Mrs. Jackson, in Four-A, was now coming down every night to complain, interrupting his dinner, his television, his nap.

That night while he was in the basement working on the faucet stem, he found the mint new hundred dollar bill under the coffee can full of rusty nails. He didn't tell Edna about it — there


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wasnt any need to. He managed all their money, including her small paycheck, and he forgot about it during the evening until the lights were out and he was in bed falling asleep.

When he recalled it, he wakened a few moments and opened his eyes. Though it was too dark to be discerned, the room needed painting. But he didn't care about that now. He'd found a hundred dollars, and that was a very nice thing. He closed his eyes again and fell into a pleasant sleep.

Harold had bought the house thirty years ago. He was so nervous the day he signed the papers that he stopped in the middle of writing his name and hurried out of the room into the hall. He touched the shoulder of a girl passing with an armful of files. "Excuse me. Please. Where is the bathroom?" He stayed until he'd purged his unstable insides entirely. Months passed before his digestion became normal again.

His grandfather had lived above a stable. His father still lived in the same cramped three rooms in Newark in which Harold had been raised. His father's heart was bad. He gave Harold most of what he had saved, saying, "You might as well have your inheritance now."

The money wasn't a lot, but still it was more than Harold could make in a year, in almost two years, and it intimidated him. His father had no advice — all he had known to do with money in his life was to save it against catastrophe. Harold put it in a bank, thought about it, talked about it with Edna nearly every night. His father died over that winter. They buried him, still unable to make a decision.

In the late spring they finally pushed themselves into commitment and bought an old building, a four-story brownstone, on Dock Street, which was in a worn but nice and clean enough section of the city. If property lost its value, then nothing would be worth anything, and it wouldn't make any difference.

They planned to occupy the bottom two floors and convert each of the top two into a floor-through apartment. Harold calculated that the rent would just about cover utilities, mortgage and taxes. They would live practically for free. The improvements would increase the natural rate of appreciation, and the house would become yearly more valuable, their equity rising rapidly. In the far future, when they finally retired and sold it, the capital they would recoup, buttressed by their social security checks, would keep them in fine comfort to the end of their lives.

Harold was in his prime, and he set to work on the house with vigor and enthusiasm. Devoting nights and weekends to it, he estimated six or seven months to renovate the top floor.

It took him thirteen months. When he pulled the ceiling down, he discovered that the insulation was damp



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and mildewed from various leaks and half a dozen joists had rotted nearly through. They had to be replaced, and the roof redone. Smashing through the plaster and lathing to open small rooms into larger, airier ones, was more difficult than he'd expected, and packing the debris into supermarket bags and carrying them down a few each night to deposit in different garbage cans up and down the street alone consumed much time and energy. The floors were bad, new partition walls had to be built, closets. Taping and spackling the fresh plasterboard accounted for a month in itself, and painting another. But at last it was done. The excitement of their first tenant and rent check resuscitated them. "It's coming back to us," Harold said jubilantly. "The house will pay for itself. It's going to work." They gave themselves a month's worth of holiday weekends and nights. Then they began again, on the interior stairs. After six weeks of clumsy attempts, Harold had to call in a professional carpenter, which consumed a sizeable piece of their modest savings. Nearly a year and a half passed before the third floor was ready. What time Harold saved with increasing skill, he lost and then lost again to flagging energy and the need to cannibalize scraps because they could not always afford new materials. They earmarked every extra dime of their paychecks for the house. Edna worked along with Harold most nights and weekends, fetching and carrying, doing the bulk of the spackling and all the primering and painting.

They lived in Spartan dinginess three and a half years before they were able to begin the reconstruction of their own two floors.

A month after he'd found the hundred dollar bill, Harold was dressing for the wedding of Edna's niece. He took the box with his formal shoes down from the shelf in the back of his closet and wiped a film of dust from it with a tissue. When he lifted the top, something wedged between it and the sidewall fell out onto the bedspread.

He pursed his mouth. It was money, creased lengthwise. Two fifty dollar bills. He showed them to Edna, who was standing at her bureau.

"What a nice surprise," she said. "You forgot they were there?"

"I didn't know they were there. I don't remember them at all."

"Well, *I* didn't put them there. I'd remember a hundred dollars, I can tell you that."

"I wore these shoes eight months ago. I haven't touched the box since then."

Edna held two scarves against her dress, trying to decide. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," she said. "When you have your shoes on, would you check to see that Pappa's ready?"

Edna's father had come to live with them. He was frail and walked with a cane. Harold had given him two rooms on the second floor. A little earlier,



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Harold and Edna had retreated to the bottom floor, planning to turn the second floor into a pair of efficiency apartments, to offset a tax rise and a jump in heating costs. There were a stove and refrigerator in his rooms, but Edna's father took most of his meals with them. Harold had been counting on both new apartments — he needed the money — but Edna's brother-in-law had died and her sister hadn't been able to take the old man in, as had been planned. It was hard, but Harold didn't resent him. Otherwise, there would be only the welfare hotels, and Harold was in too much horror of those to allow that to happen.

The following month Harold found five twenty-dollar bills under a couch cushion. They were lying flat on the ticking over the springs. He called Edna in from the kitchen.

"Look at these."

She turned them over in her hands. "Is there something wrong with them? Are they counterfeit?"

"No. No, they're fine. I found them under the cushion here. I don't know how they got there."

"You must have hidden them."

"I didn't. I tell you I didn't."

"Why are you getting upset?"

"Because I didn't put them there, damn it. And I didn't put the hundred dollars I found last month into the shoebox either. And the month before that I found a hundred dollar bill in the basement, and I don't remember putting that there either."

Edna touched his face. "Ssshh. Ssshh, now. Finding three hundred dollars is no reason to get upset."

"You don't understand."

"Yes, I do. You found three hundred dollars and I'm going to thank God in my prayers tonight."

A month later, he found three twenties and four tens in a *Readers Digest* book of condensed novels. He was unnerved.

Edna looked at the bills and frowned, as they did on television when confronted with a puzzle. She went, "Hhmm."

Harold put the money into the cardboard sleeve containing the passbook to his bank account. He was almost afraid of the bills. These last two weeks he'd been working hard plastering the holes the tenants had left in the walls of one of the apartments and repainting. He'd planned to relax and read a book, something he did only two or three times a year. But after he tucked the money away, he couldn't keep his mind on the words, it kept turning back to the money — four hundred dollars now — and so he went down to the basement and took a plane, and a hammer and an old screwdriver to knock out the hinge pins, and climbed the stair to Mr. Wentworth's apartment to work on the bathroom door, which was sticking.

He didn't finish and get the tools away until late. Edna was asleep. But she woke up some when he got into bed.



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"Maybe you hid the money before we got robbed," she said. "Maybe it's left over from then."

"No," he said. "I'd remember. I'm sure I'd remember."

He used to keep money in the house, in secret places. For vague emergencies, which never occurred. They had been burglarized, and the detective who'd come to investigate told them they were foolish, even though the hidden cash hadn't been discovered this time. Burglars knew much more about the clever places people hid things than the people did, he said. They were only asking for trouble. Harold had stopped hiding money.

"It couldn't be that," he said.

Edna was asleep again.

He found one hundred dollars in the back pocket of a pair of work pants the following month, and again, balanced delicately between the wall and the framed print of a covered bridge, the month after that.

"It's Pappa," Edna said. "He's hiding the money where we'll find it because you won't take any from him."

"I won't take any from him because he doesn't have any."

"He has his social security, and you know how grateful he is."

"There's nothing left out of that."

"It must be him. It couldn't be anyone else. He'd deny it if I asked him — he's stubborn that way — but I'll watch him. I'll count what he spends and see how much he has left over. You'll see."

Over the next few months Harold found various combinations of bills, always in odd and random places, always summing to exactly one hundred dollars. Usually he uncovered the money the first or second day of the month; once on the fourth, once on the sixth. Edna wrote down the cost of a tin of pipe tobacco her father bought, a crossword puzzle magazine, checked the register receipts from his meager weekly shopping, hardly missed a penny that he spent. She was forced to agree with Harold. Pappa had no more than fifteen or twenty dollars a month for which she couldn't account.

"Maybe it's some kind of ghost," she offered. "Someone rich who owned the house once and still feels attached to it. Aren't there records somewhere? Couldn't we find out what kind of people lived here?"

But neither of them actually believed in ghosts, and there was no baffling event beyond the monthly hundred dollars, and in time even that ceased to be remarkable and was absorbed into the general flow of their lives, and they came not to pay much attention to it. Now and then Harold would comment that the money had shown up rolled into a shade or in the circuit-breaker box, or Edna would ask casually if he'd found it yet, but they didn't think about it beyond that.

After she'd ruled Pappa out, Edna commented, "Well, the house is finally



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paying us back. It's what you always said it should do, that you'd make it do."

They used the hundreds where and when they were needed, figuring the amount into their monthly income as they did the tenants' rent. For a while it was treat money, modest, but a source of pleasure and flexibility.

Nearly seven years passed after they bought the house before they were able to finish their own quarters. They were exhausted, their savings were gone, and they had bank loans to meet. The money from their jobs and the rent gave them enough to meet their obligations, with only a small surplus left over.

"But we have the house," Harold said the night he finished the last room. "If we sold it tomorrow we'd walk away with a nice piece of cash. Not a fortune, but a nice piece. It's more than most have, and it'll be worth even more each year."

They had neither the money nor the energy to begin the exterior. They fell into a kind of torpor through two seasons, pumping up their spirits briefly in the winter with a vacation in Florida. It was the first in seven years, and the last for many more.

By the time they did finish the outside of the house, they had owned it for a decade. The first apartment Harold had constructed was in need of repair and modernization. Harold began to understand that habitats were not fixed, did not exist independent of time and hard use. He had not finished the house, it would never be finished. Renovation was a cycle, not a one-time affair. A house required constant care if it was to avoid disintegration. It was a bedridden relative, a brain-damaged child. One devoted the large part of one's life to its care.

Harold and Edna put off having the children they thought they might want until there was more time, more money. They passed into middle-age working on the house.

The city changed, the neighborhood changed. There were times, when other buildings down the street were being renovated and a spirit of optimism and renewal was abroad, that they could have sold the house for a handsome sum. But then money was not difficult, and they were drawing a decent profit from their tenants, and the house was appreciating rapidly. It seemed foolish to sell when life there was fairly satisfactory and when, in a little while longer, the house would be worth even several thousands more.

But such periods were brief, transient, and finally not be seen again at all. The urban renewal projects many blocks to the north, and again to the west, failed to revivify the slum neighborhoods. Instead, they seemed simply bases from which decay spread further outward. There was violence in the streets. Little family businesses went under one by one in slow attrition. Mr. Chiswycz, the owner of Dock Street



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Liquors, with whom Harold sometimes played pinochle, was killed in a holdup. Single rooms were rented by the week. At night, strange music from instruments they did not know, rhythms they could not keep time to, and passions they did not understand, came spilling from open windows. There were idle unshaven men about.

Everything grew more expensive. Harold and Edna were forced to break the large apartments they had built into more and smaller ones. Where before they had been frugal, now they were forced to become penurious. The value of the house began to decline.

They were trapped, though they wouldn't admit that to themselves. Gradually, they abandoned their hope that the house would support them and eventually supply the cornerstone of their retirement. Their long campaign of accomplishment ended, then slipped into a holding action, an attempt to salvage what they could. Harold became determined to make the house pay them back.

The death of Edna's father did not interrupt the arrival of a hundred dollars every month. Harold came to expect it, as he did the rent checks. While there was no system he could perceive, he did note what seemed to be a trend toward later dates. Only infrequently did he come across the money in the first week of any month; usually it was the second, appearing now to stretch into the third. Harold grew annoyed, as he would with a tenant habitually late with the rent.

"Damn it," he said, "I like to clear the bills off the desk by the seventh. I don't like waiting like this." he scowled at the house in general.

"I don't know that that's a good way of looking at it, dear," Edna said. "It's not as if we have a right to the money."

"We have a right to every penny of it, and a hell of a lot more. We put our lives into this house. It owes us *its* life. It owes us everything!"

Edna began to worry about Harold.

The two rooms that Pappa had occupied stood empty, still connected by stairs to Harold and Edna's quarters. Harold had delayed converting them into an apartment. Finally he announced that he refused to do it.

"It would just take more money and time. We'd bring in something extra for a little while, but then that would get eaten up to, like everything else. There's no point. I'm not going to put anything more into this house. I'm going to make it pay us back."

Harold had used the first few hundreds he'd found to buy materials and to pay off an electrician. Then, for a while, he spent the money on himself and Edna. Awkwardly, unaccustomed to such indulgence, they gave themselves nights out, magazine subscriptions, little pieces of clothing they favored. But soon the bills mounted again, prices rose even further, and the



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ıundreds became just ordinary money, ıever enough of it.

"This goddamn house!" Harold anted. "This *goddamn* house! It hinks it can get away with twelve hun-ıred a year. It thinks we'll settle for hat. The hell we will!" He hurled an ıld cast iron doorstop against the wall, racking the plasterboard.

Edna bit down on her knuckle.

Harold began to let the house go. le grew reluctant to make repairs.

"I've worked for thirty years on it. hat's enough. I'm not going to do one ıore goddamn thing or put one more oddamn penny into it."

The house began to look as shabby s the others on the block. When Four- became vacant, they had trouble rent-ıg it and it stood empty two months. tenant on the third floor was visited y the police. He disappeared the next ight, leaving the apartment in a sham-les. Harold repainted it with intense sentment, but would do nothing ore, letting it stand damaged, and ıving to take a lower rent.

At the end of the second year in hich the hundreds had been appear-g, the boiler went out.

The repairman knocked on it with s knuckles and said, "They don't last rever, you know. This was a good ıe in its day, but that was twenty-five ars ago."

A new boiler would cost three ousand. Harold said he would call the end of the week.

They came up from the basement into the kitchen, where Edna was cleaning a cabinet. Harold led the repairman to the door and let him out. Hispanic music from transistor radios burst through the open door. Dogs barked. A car horn screamed in rage. There was some foul language from the street. Harold closed the door with a bang.

He stood in the hallway, angry eyes flicking from the walls to the ceiling. "Oh, no," he said. "You're not going to take it back. Oh, no. That's every penny you've paid off." He raised a fist. *"I'm not giving it back!"*

Edna went to him. "Harold. Please."

He was flushed and short of breath. He allowed her to lead him into the living room, and to a chair. "Sit," she said. "Please, Harold. Sit quietly. Let me get you some tea."

Over the stove, she heard him from the living room, hissing savagely at the house.

At the end of the week he rejected a new boiler and ordered five hundred dollars' worth of repairs on the old one. "That's all it gets," he said. "I'm not giving it a nickel more."

They limped through the winter with the old boiler, calling twice for emergency service.

By spring Harold wasn't finding the hundred dollars until the third and often the fourth week of the month. The waiting dominated him. He was sour and angry with the house until he uncovered the money; then he had a



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few days of joyless respite until the new month arrived and his surly impatience began once more.

On the last day of June, Harold still hadn't found the month's money. He was angry. When he got home from work he told Edna to call and cancel a dinner they were supposed to have with friends.

"We haven't seen them in almost a year," Edna pleaded. "We haven't seen *anyone* for months. Please, Harold. It won't help to stay home and wait for it. It comes when it comes, you know you can't do anything about it."

"All right," he said. "All right. But I want to be home by eleven. That gives it an hour left."

He dressed. They went out onto the street. He looked back at the house. "Just like everyone else," he said bitterly. "They want you to pay what you owe them immediately, but they never want to pay what they owe you until the last minute."

The evening was subdued. Harold couldn't keep his mind on the conversation and was quiet for long periods. They left early, and walked down Lowery Avenue. It was eleven o'clock when they turned onto Dock Street. A ragged drunk was on his hands and knees next to the supermarket on the corner, vomiting against the steel shutters that were closed over its windows at night. Fair Street was empty except for a couple of feral cats slipping through the shadows. Harold had been silent on the walk. Edna was holdin his hand. As they neared the house she felt sweat prickle onto his palm His stride lengthened, his pace increas ed. He hurried down the few steps t the entrance, keys already in hand.

The carriage light beside the doo had shorted out months ago. Harol probed in the dimness for the lock. Ed na jarred into him from behind.

"What are you doing?" he said "I—"

He was seized by the shoulder spun around and thrown up agains the wall. A big youth with bushy side burns locked a hand around his throa and stuck a pistol in his face.

"Just shut the fuck up, man!"

There were two others. One in yellow T-shirt was already tearin through Edna's purse. The remainin one, tall and pock-faced, jerke Harold's wallet from his pocket.

"Three dollars," said the one wi Edna's purse.

The tall boy extracted the bills fro Harold's wallet and flung it asid "Shit, there's only five here."

"Eight stinking lousy dollars!" T boy with the sideburns slashed t pistol across Harold's face. Haro dropped to his knees. Blood dripp down onto his shirt.

Edna screamed. The tall b clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Eight dollars!" the boy with t gun said. He kicked Harold.

Harold fell over on his side. His sion wavered, he tasted acid in



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mouth. The boy moved to kick him again.

"No. Please. I've got money," Harold gasped. "I've got a hundred dollars. I'll give you a hundred dollars. It's inside. Inside the house." He held up his keys.

The boy in the yellow T-shirt bounced up and down on the balls of his feet. "Let's get out of here."

The one with the gun took the keys from Harold. "They got a hundred bucks, man." He opened the door.

The other two brought Harold and Edna in.

"Get it," the leader said. He pointed the gun at Edna. "If you try anything, I'll blow her fuckin' brains out."

"It's cash," Harold said. "You can have it. Don't hurt us. Don't hurt us. Please."

He ran to the end table in the vestibule, pawed through the magazines. He opened the knick-knack box atop the table, dumped its contents, threw it aside.

"Come on, come on," the boy said.

"It's here! I'm getting it!"

He rushed down the hall into the kitchen.

"Go with him!" the leader ordered the tall boy.

The boy sprinted down the hall after Harold.

There was the sound of cabinet doors banging open, drawers being pulled out. Pots clanged. Crockery broke. Chairs were knocked over.

Harold burst out of the kitchen. "It's here!" he cried. "A hundred dollars. There's a hundred dollars every month."

He veered into the bedroom. The tall boy hurried after him. There were bangs, breaking and tearing sounds.

The tall boy came out, frowning nervously. "He's gone crazy in there. He's tearing everything apart."

Harold shouted, "Where are you? Goddamn you, where are you?"

"He's freaked, man."

The boy with the gun pinched his lower lip between his teeth. He pointed into the living room. "Grab the television." He jabbed the gun at Edna. "If you call the cops, we'll come back and kill you!"

They ran out of the house.

Edna leaned against the wall, moaning. She made her way down the hall to the bedroom. The bedroom was in ruin. The closet doors gaped. Clothes and opened boxes were strewn about the floor. The drawers had been stripped from the dressers, one of the dressers thrown over. The drapes had been pulled down and the metal screen-cover ripped from the radiator, the carpeting yanked up. Harold stood in the center of the room, disheveled, breathing stertorously, blood from his wound soaking his collar.

"It's got to be here!"

Edna held her hands out to him.

He pushed past her. She followed him awkwardly, light-headed. She stopped midway down the basement stairs and held on to the banister with



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both hands. Harold was hurling tools about, boxes, cans of screws and nails, jars of hardware which broke on the concrete floor. He ripped down the fluorescent light over the worktable. *"Where are you?"* He whirled, eyes darting, and ripped the door off the circuit box. He threw his shoulder against a standing wardrobe, toppling it. He grabbed a crowbar and beat it against the wardrobe, splintering open the veneer, pulling out winter clothes.

He charged up the stairs, ignoring Edna, crowbar in hand, screaming, "Where did you hide it? Where?"

Edna whimpered.

In the living room, he smashed the mirrors on the wall, tore the stuffing from the couch and chairs, hurled books down from the shelves. He went into Pappa's old rooms, flung the furniture about, tore the medicine cabinet down, slashed at the framed prints with the hooked end of the crowbar.

"Don't think you're going to cheat me!" he screamed at the house.

He went out onto the street, up the half flight of stairs to the tenants' entrance. Edna stumbled dumbly after him. He smashed the glass panel from the door, reached in, turned the lock and jerked the door open. He battered the row of mail boxes in the wall.

"Where is it? You owe me!"

The door to Two-A opened. An alarmed young man in glasses and a cardigan sweater stood there. Harold shoved past him into the apartment. He tore a chandelier down from the ceiling, grabbed up potted plants from a room divider and threw them to the floor. He destroyed a radio, attacked the walls with the crowbar, punching jagged holes into them.

*"Give it to me!"* he shrieked.

Edna leaned against the wall crying. The young man put an arm around her and backed with her through the vestibule out past the broken door onto the steps.

Harold staggered out of the apartment, climbed up the stairs to the next landing. He beat the crowbar against the door of Three-B, and when it was opened by a frightened woman with a child in her arms, he threw her into the hall and plunged inside, swinging the bar....

The tenants gathered outside on the street, looking up to the building in silent fearfulness. Edna stood with them. Her head was bowed and her hands clasped up to her lips. People began to come out of other buildings to stand in the street and look up.

Crashes and shatterings sounded. Occasionally some object would burst out through a window with a shower of glass, causing everyone to shrink back. Now and then a glimpse of Harold could be caught, rushing past a window; or his shadow, deformed and enlarged, in violent action.

*"Give it to me!"* they heard him shout. "Give it to me, you bastard. I'll kill you!"

In time, someone thought to call the police. A little later a station



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wagon marked *Police Emergency* and filled with first-aid and rescue equipment pulled to the curb at the edge of the crowd. The two officers conferred briefly with the nearest persons, then went into the building. Other patrol cars began to arrive.

There was screaming from the top floor. Silence followed. The officers emerged onto the steps with Harold between them, wrists handcuffed behind his back. His clothes were torn and bloodstained. His face was vacant.

They led him down the stairs. "All right, it's all over. Give us some room there. Go back home. It's over."

Edna moved toward them.

Harold stumbled. He lifted his face. His mouth twisted. He groaned. He collapsed to the pavement.

One of the policemen knelt, touched Harold's cheek, studied him a moment. "Heart," he said.

He bent forward to administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. His partner hurried to the station wagon for an oxygen tank. Other police kept the crowd back. When the oxygen mask was fitted to Harold's face, the kneeling officer removed the handcuffs and loosened Harold's clothing. Harold's left hand was splayed and limp; his right was curled into a tight fist beside his hip.

A policeman said, "Come on, lady. It's not a circus. Get back now."

"I'm his wife," Edna said through tears.

The policeman let her through. Two officers were lifting Harold onto a stretcher. His eyes were closed. There were lines of pain in his face. His clenched right hand moved up to lie on his stomach. It trembled there.

Edna walked beside him as they carried him to the station wagon, her hand on his shoulder, crying quietly. A policeman helped her into the vehicle, where she sat cumbrously beside Harold. The station wagon pulled away with red light flashing and siren beginning an upward wail.

Harold's eyelids fluttered. They opened. He looked at Edna. He lifted his balled right hand. Shakily, the fingers loosened and opened. She looked at the lines and scars on his palm.

She took his hand in her own. She pressed her lips to the palm. He closed his eyes. His hand lowered back down to the stretcher beside him and lay open, and flat, and empty.

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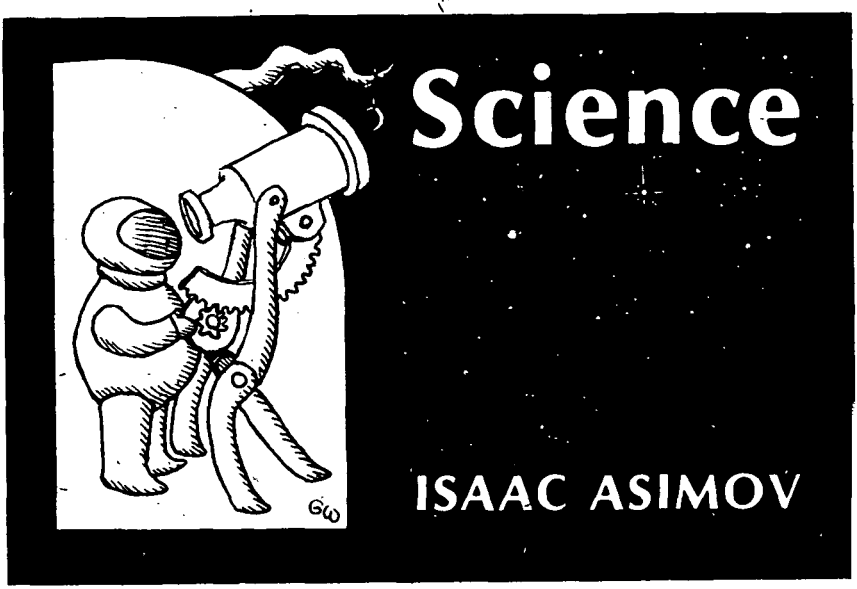


## MILTON! THOU SHOULD'ST BE LIVING AT THIS HOUR

Some time ago I was signing books at Bloomingdale's Department Store. I don't recommend this as a general practice if you are in the least bit shy or sensitive.

It involves sitting at some makeshift table with a pile of your books about you, amidst a vast display of women's garments (that happened to be the section near which I was placed). People pass you with expressions varying from complete indifference to mild distaste. Sometimes they look at the books with an expression that might be interpreted as "What junk is this that meets my eye?" then pass on.

And, of course, every once in a while someone comes up and buys a book, and you sign it out of sheer gratitude.

Fortunately, I am utterly without self-consciousness and can meet any eye without blushing, but I imagine that those who are more sensitive than I would experience torture. Even I would give it a miss were it not that my publisher arranges such things and I don't want to seem unreasonably uncooperative in measures designed to sell my books.



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At any rate, there I was at Bloomingdale's and a tall woman in her thirties (I should judge) and quite attractive, rushed up smiling, with a pretty flush mantling her cheeks and said, "I am so glad and honored to meet you."

"Well," said I, becoming incredibly suave at once, as I always am in the presence of attractive women, "that is as nothing to my pleasure in meeting *you.*"

"Thank you," she said, then added, "I want you to know I have just seen Teibele and the Demon.'"

That seemed irrelevant, but I said the polite thing. "I hope you enjoyed it."

"Oh, I *did.* I thought it was wonderful, and I wanted to tell you that."

There was no real reason for her to do so, but politeness above all. "That's kind of you," I said.

"And I hope you make a billion dollars out of it," she said.

"That would be nice," I admitted, though privately I didn't think the owners of the play would let me share in the proceeds even to the extent of a single penny.

We shook hands and separated, and I never bothered to tell her that I was Isaac Asimov and not Isaac Bashevis Singer. It would merely have embarrassed her and spoiled her kindly good wishes.

My only concern is that someday she will meet Isaac Bashevis Singer and will say to him, "You imposter! I met the *real* Isaac Bashevis Singer and he's young and handsome."

On the other hand, she may not say that.

But then, it's easy to make mistakes.

For instance, most people who have heard of John Milton think of him as an epic poet second only to Shakespeare in renown and genius. As evidence, they point to "Paradise Lost."

I, on the other hand, always think of Milton as something more than merely that.

The poet William Wordsworth, back in 1802, found himself in low spirits when he decided that England was a fen of stagnant waters and moaned. "Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour."

Well, Bill, if Milton were living at *this* hour, here in the late 20th Century, I'm sure he would be that acme of art, a science fiction writer. As evidence, I point to "Paradise Lost."

"Paradise Lost" opens as Satan and his band of rebellious angels are re-



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covering in Hell, after having been defeated in Heaven. For nine days the stricken rebels have been unconscious, but now Satan slowly becomes aware of where he is:

"At once as far as Angel's ken he views the dismal situation waste and wild, a dungeon horrible, on all sides round as one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames no light, but rather darkness visible served only to discover sights of woe."

Milton is, essentially, describing an extra-terrestrial world. (As Carl Sagan has remarked, our present view of the planet, Venus, is not very far removed from the common conception of Hell.)

The remark about "darkness visible" is surely modeled on the description of Sheol (the Old Testament version of Hell) in the Book of Job: "A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness."

Milton's phrase makes it graphic, however, and is a daring concept; one that is a century and a half in advance of science, for what Milton is saying is that there can be some radiation that is not visible as ordinary light and yet can be used to detect objects.

"Paradise Lost" was published in 1667, but it was not until 1800 that the German-English astronomer, William Herschel, showed that the visible spectrum did not include all the radiation there was; that beyond the red there was "infar-red" radiation that could not be seen but could be detected in other ways.

In other words, with remarkable prescience, Milton had Hell lit by flames that gave off infra-red light, but not visible light (at least we can interpret the passage so). To human eyes Hell would be in darkness, but Satan's more-than-human retina could detect the infra-red and to him it was "darkness visible."

Where is the Hell that is occupied by Satan and his fallen angels? The common view of the location of Hell, from ancient times on, is that it is somewhere deep in the Earth. The fact that bodies are buried underground contributes, I suppose, to this feeling. The fact that there are earthquakes and volcanoes gives rise to the thought that there is activity down there and that it is a place of fire and brimstone. Dante placed Hell at the center of the Earth, and so would most unsophisticates of our culture today, I think.

Milton avoids that. Here's how he describes the location of Hell:

"Such place Eternal Justice had prepared for those rebellious, here their prison ordained in utter darkness, and their portion set as far removed



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from God and the light of Heaven as from the center thrice to the utmost Pole."

It is logical to suppose the "center" to be the center of the Earth, since that was also taken to be the center of the observable Universe in the Greek geocentric view of the Universe. This view was not shaken until Copernicus's heliocentric theory was published in 1543, but the Copernican view was not instantly accepted. Scientific and literary conservatives held to the Greek view. It took Galileo and his telescopic observations in 1609 and thereafter to establish the Sun at the center.

Milton, however, although writing a good half-century after the discoveries of Galileo, could not let go of the Greek view. After all, he was dealing with the Biblical story, and the Biblical picture of the Universe is a geocentric one.

Nor was this because Milton did not know about the telescopic findings. Milton had even visited Galileo in Italy in 1639 and refers to him in "Paradise Lost" At one point, he finds it necessary to describe Satan's round and gleaming shield. (All the characters in "Paradise Lost" act and talk as much like Homeric heroes as possible and are armed just as Achilles would be — that's part of the epic convention.)

Milton says that Satan's shield is like the Moon "whose Orb through optic glass the Tuscan artist views...to descry new lands, rivers or mountains in her spotty globe." There is no question but that the "Tuscan artist" is Galileo.

Nevertheless, Milton doesn't want to be involved in astronomical controversy, and in Book VIII of the epic he has the archangel Raphael respond to Adam's questions on the workings of the Universe in this way:

"To ask or search I blame thee not, for Heaven is as the Book of God before thee set, wherein to read his wondrous works, and learn his seasons, hours, or days, or months, or years: This to attain, whether Heaven move or Earth, imports not, if thou reckon right; the rest from man or angel the great Architect did wisely to conceal, and not divulge his secrets to be scanned by them who ought rather admire."

In other words, all that human beings need out of astronomy is a guide whereby to form a calendar; and to do this, it doesn't matter whether Earth moves or the Sun. I can't help but feel this to be a very cowardly evasion. The pious of the world were willing to denounce, excommunicate and even burn those who claimed the Earth moved — until the evidence began to show clearly that Earth *did* move, and when that came about, they then said, "Oh, well, it imports not; what's the difference?" If it imports not,



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why did they make all that fuss earlier?

So the Miltonic Universe remains geocentric, the last important geocentric Universe in Western culture. The "center" Milton speaks of in locating Hell is the center of the Earth.

The distance from the center of the Earth to its pole, either the North Pole or the South Pole, is 4,000 miles, and this figure was known to Milton. The Earth had been several times circumnavigated by Milton's time, and its size was well-known.

In that case, "thrice" that distance would be 12,000 miles, and if this is the interpretation of "from the center thrice to the utmost Pole," then Hell would be 12,000 miles from Heaven.

It seems reasonable to suppose that Earth is equidistant between Hell and Heaven. If, then, Heaven were 2,000 miles from Earth in one direction and Hell 2,000 miles from Earth in the opposite direction, that would allow Hell to be 12,000 miles from Heaven if we count in Earth's 8,000 miles diameter.

But this is ridiculous. If Heaven and Hell were each 2,000 miles away, surely we would see them. The Moon is 240,000 miles away (something the Greeks, and therefore Milton, knew), and we see it without trouble. To be sure, the Moon is a large body, but surely Heaven and Hell would be large also.

Something is wrong. Let's reconsider—

The line in Milton reads, "from the center thrice to the utmost pole." What is the *utmost* pole? Surely, it is the Celestial Pole, the point in the sky that is directly overhead when you stand on a Terrestrial Pole.

No one in Milton's time knew how far away the Celestial Pole was. Astronomers knew the Moon was a quarter of a million miles away, and the best guess the Greeks had been able to make where the distance of the Sun was concerned was 5 million miles. Since the Sun was the middle planet of the seven (in the Greek view, which listed them in order of increasing distance as Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn), it would be fair to consider the farthest planet, Saturn, to be 10 million miles away. The sky itself, with the stars painted upon it, would be immediately beyond Saturn.

A reasonable guess, then, for the shape of the Universe in Milton's time, would be that of a large sphere about 10 million miles in radius and, therefore 20 million miles in diameter. Such a size would be acceptable to the astronomers of the day whether they thought the Earth was at the center or the Sun.



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If, then, we imagine Heaven to lie outside the Celestial Sphere in one direction and Hell in another, we have a vision of three separate universes, each enclosed by a spherical "sky." In Book II, Milton speaks of "this firmament of Hell" so that he must be thinking of Hell as having a sky of its own (with planets and stars of its own, I wonder?) Presumably, so would Heaven.

Miton doesn't indicate anywhere in the epic, just how large he thinks the Celestial Sphere is, or how large Heaven and Hell are, or exactly what their spatial relationship to each other is. I suppose that the simplest setup would be to have the three of them arranged in an equilateral triangle so that, center to center, each is 30 million miles from the other two. If all are equal in size and each is 10 million miles in radius, then each is 10 million miles from the other two, firmament to firmament. This is an un-Miltonic picture, but at least it is consistent with what he says and with the state of astronomy at the time.

Milton, having postulated three separate Universes, each neatly enclosed in a solid, thin curve of metal, called the "firmament," invites the question: What lies outside these three Universes?

This question arises in modern science, too, which visualizes our Universe expanding from a small condensed body some 15 billion years ago. What lies beyond the volume to which it has now expanded? ask the questioners.

Scientists might speculate, but they have no answer, and it may even be that there will prove no conceivable way in which they can find an answer.

Milton was more fortunate, for he knew the answer.

Later, Milton has Satan point out that the storm is over, that the Divine attack which hurled the rebelling angels out of Heaven and down a long, long fall into Hell has now died away:

"And the thunder, winged with red lightning and impetuous rage, perhaps hath spent his shafts, and ceases now to bellow through the vast and boundless Deep."

In the Biblical story of Creation, it is stated that, to begin with, "darkness was on the face of the deep." The Biblical writers apparently saw the Universe at its beginning as a formless waste of waters.

Milton must accept the word for he cannot deny the Bible, but he grafts onto it Greek notions. The Greeks believed that the Universe was originally Chaos; that is "Disorder," with all its fundamental building blocks ("elements") randomly mixed. The Divine Creation, in this view, consisted not in bringing matter into existence out of nothing, but in sorting out



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those mixed elements and creating Cosmos (an ordered Universe) out of Chaos.

Milton, in the epic, equates the Biblical "deep" with the Classical "chaos" and has it "boundless."

In other words, in the Miltonic view, God, who is eternal, existed to begin with but for countless eons was surrounded by an infinite waste of Chaos.

At some time, presumably, he created Heaven, along with hordes of angels who were given the job of singing the praises of their Creator. When some of the angels got bored with the task and rebelled, God created the companion world of Hell and hurled the rebels into it. Immediately thereafter, he created a Celestial sphere within which a new experiment might be housed—humanity.

All three, then, are embedded in the still infinite sea of Chaos in which, if God chose, innumerable more celestial spheres might be formed, though Milton nowhere says so.

(This view is rather similar, in some ways, to a speculation of my own in I'M LOOKING OVER A FOUR-LEAF CLOVER, F&SF, September 1966.

Milton goes on to describe how the fallen angels, in their new home, so different from their old and so much worse, nevertheless get to work to try to make it as livable as possible. "Soon had his crew opened into the hill a spacious wound and digged out ribs of gold."

Although gold is an entirely unsuitable structural metal (too soft and too dense) and is valued only for its beauty and rareness, human beings, completely mistaking a subjective assigned value for the real thing, have unimaginatively dreamed of golden buildings and golden streets (studded with equally unsuitable precious stones) as the highest form of luxury. They have imagined Heaven to consist of such structures and apparently the fallen angels want to make their new habitation as much like home as possible.

They build a city, which they call "All-Demons" in a democratic touch that contrasts with the absolute autocracy of Heaven. Of course, the name is given in Greek so that it is "Pandemonium." Because all the denizens of Hell meet there in conference, the word has entered the English language from Milton's epic to mean the loud, confused noise that would seem characteristic, in our imaginings, of a Hellish gathering.

There follows a democratic conference in which Satan, who has rebelled against God's dictatorship, welcomes the views of anyone who wishes to



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speak. Moloch, the most unreconstructed of the angelic rebels, advocates renewed war: meeting God's weapons with an armory drawn from Hell—

"To meet the noise of his Almighty Engine he shall hear Infernal thunder, and for lightning see black fire and horror shot with equal rage among his angels; and his Throne itself mixt with Tartarean sulfur, and strange fire."

The "black fire" is the "darkness visible" of Hell. "Strange fire" is an expression from the Bible. Two sons of Aaron burned "strange fire" at the altar and were struck dead in consequence. The Bible doesn't explain what is meant by "strange fire." One can guess that the unfortunates didn't use the proper ritual in starting the fire or in blessing it.

Here, however, we can't help think in the hindsight of our recent knowledge that infrared is not the only direction in which we can step out of the visible spectrum. There is also ultraviolet at the energetic end, along with x-rays and gamma rays. Is Moloch suggesting that the demons counter the lightning with energetic radiation (black fire) and nuclear bombs (strange fire)?

After all, Milton can't be thinking merely of gunpowder when he speaks of "strange fire." As is explained later in the epic, the rebelling angels used gunpowder in their first battle and were defeated anyway. So it has to be something beyond gunpowder! (What a science fiction writer was lost in Milton by virtue of his being born too soon!)

Once the various rebels have spoken, each arguing a different point of view, Satan makes a decision. He is not for outright war, nor for surrendering to defeat either. Suppose, though, that someone were to make his way to the human celestial sphere. There that someone might try to corrupt the freshly-created human beings and thus spoil at least part of God's plan.

It would not be an easy task. In the first place, whoever essayed it would have to break through Hell's firmament, which "immures us round ninefold, and gates of burning Adamant barred over us prohibit all egress."

Then, even if someone managed to break out, "the void profound of unessential Night receives him next."

This is an amazing line. Consider—

There had been stories of trips from Earth to the Moon even in ancient times. In 1638, an English clergyman, Francis Godwin, had written "Man in the Moone" about such a trip, and it had been a great success. Milton may well have known about the book so that the notion of travel between worlds was not absolutely new.



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Yet all previous tales of trips of the Moon had assumed that air existed everywhere within the celestial sphere. Godwin's heroes had gotten to the Moon by hitching wild swans to a chariot and having the birds fly him there.

Milton, however, was talking not about interplanetary travel nor even about interstellar travel. He was speaking of travel from one universe to another, and he was the first writer on the subject to realize he would *not* be travelling through air.

The Italian physicist, Evangelista Torricelli, by weighing air in 1643, had shown that the atmosphere had to be limited in height and that the space between worlds was a vacuum, but this stunning new concept was for the most part ignored by otherwise imaginative writers for a long time (just as so many of them ignore the speed-of-light limit today).

Milton reached out for the concept, however, when he speaks of a "void profound" and of "unessential Night."

Night is the synonym for Chaos ("*darkness* brooded over the face of the deep") and "unessential" means "without essence," without the fundamental elements. And yet, as we shall see, Milton reached out, but only partly grasped the notion.

Satan, scorning to propose a dangerous task for someone else to fulfill, undertakes the journey himself. He makes his way to the bounds of Hell, where he encounters a hag ("Sin") and her monstrous son ("Death"). There he persuades the hag, who holds the key, to open the barrier. Satan then looks out upon the "void profound."

What Satan now sees is a "hoary deep, a dark illimitable ocean without bound, without dimension, where length, breadth, and height, and time and place are lost; where eldest Night and Chaos, ancestors of Nature, hold eternal anarchy, amidst the noise of endless wars, and by confusion stand. For hot, cold, moist, and dry, four champions fierce strive here for mastery, and to battle bring their embryon atoms."

This is not a vacuum that Satan describes, but it is a concept equally daring, for Milton's imaginative description of Chaos comes quite close to the modern view of the state of maximum entropy.

If everything is a random mixture and if there are no substantial differences in properties from point to point in space, then there is no way of making any measurement, for there is nothing to seize upon as a reference point. Length, breadth and height, the three spatial dimensions, no longer have meaning. Furthermore, since the flow of time is measured in the direc-



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tion of increasing entropy, when that entropy has reached its maximum, there is no longer any way of measuring time. Time has no meaning any more than position does: "time and place are lost."

The Greeks divided matter into four elements, each with its characteristic properties. Earth was dry and cold, fire was dry and hot, water was wet and cold, air was wet and hot. In Chaos, these properties are thrown into total confusion, and, indeed, maximum entropy is equivalent to total disorder.

Suppose the Universe is in a state of maximum entropy, so that (in Greek terms) Chaos exists. Once total randomness exists, continuing random shiftings of properties may, after an incredibly long interval (but then, since time doesn't exist at maximum entropy, an incredibly long interval might as well be a split-second for all anyone can say) chance may just happen to produce order and the Universe may begin again. (If a well-shuffled deck of cards is shuffled further, then eventually, all the spades, hearts, clubs and diamonds may just happen to come back into order.) The role of God would then be to hasten this random event and make it certain.

In describing Chaos in Greek terms, Milton, however, does not entirely let go of the notion of a vacuum. If Chaos has all matter mixed, there must be fragments of non-matter mixed into it as well, or it would not be true Chaos. Every once in a while, then, Satan might encounter a bit of vacuum, as an airplane may strike a downdraft.

Thus, Satan meets "a vast vacuity: all unawares fluttering his pennons vain plumb-down he drops ten thousand fathom deep, and to this hour down had been falling, had not by ill chance the strong rebuff of some tumultuous cloud instinct with fire and nitre hurried him as many miles aloft."


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I believe this is the first mention of vacuum between worlds in literature. (To be sure, Milton did not have the notion of gravity straight. He wrote twenty years before Newton's great book on the subject was published.)

Satan makes it. By the end of Book II of "Paradise Lost," he has reached Earth, having performed as daring and imaginative a journey as any in modern science fiction.

There's just one other touch I want to mention. In Book VII, Adam asks the archangel Raphael, how the angels make love—

"To whom the Angel with a smile that glowed celestial rosy red, Love's proper hue, answered, 'Let it suffice thee that thou knowest us happy, and without Love no happiness. Whatever pure thou in the body enjoyest (and pure thou were created) we enjoy in eminence, and obstacle find none of membrane, joint, or limb exclusive bars: Easier than air with air, if Spirits embrace, total they mix, union of Pure with Pure desiring..."

When *I* wanted to write about another Universe and about a group of living organisms totally different from ourselves, I needed one thing that was really strange about which to build all else.

I had my organisms make love totally and "obstacle find none." I arranged three sexes as a further difference and "total they mix." Out of that came the second section of my novel "The Gods Themselves," which won a Hugo and a Nebula in 1973.

So if you want to know where I get my crazy ideas—well sometimes I borrow them from the best science fiction writers —like John Milton.

And if by some chance you suddenly feel interested in reading "Paradise Lost," I suggest you find a copy of "Asimov's Annotated 'Paradise Lost'". Some people think it's pretty good; *I* think it's extremely good.

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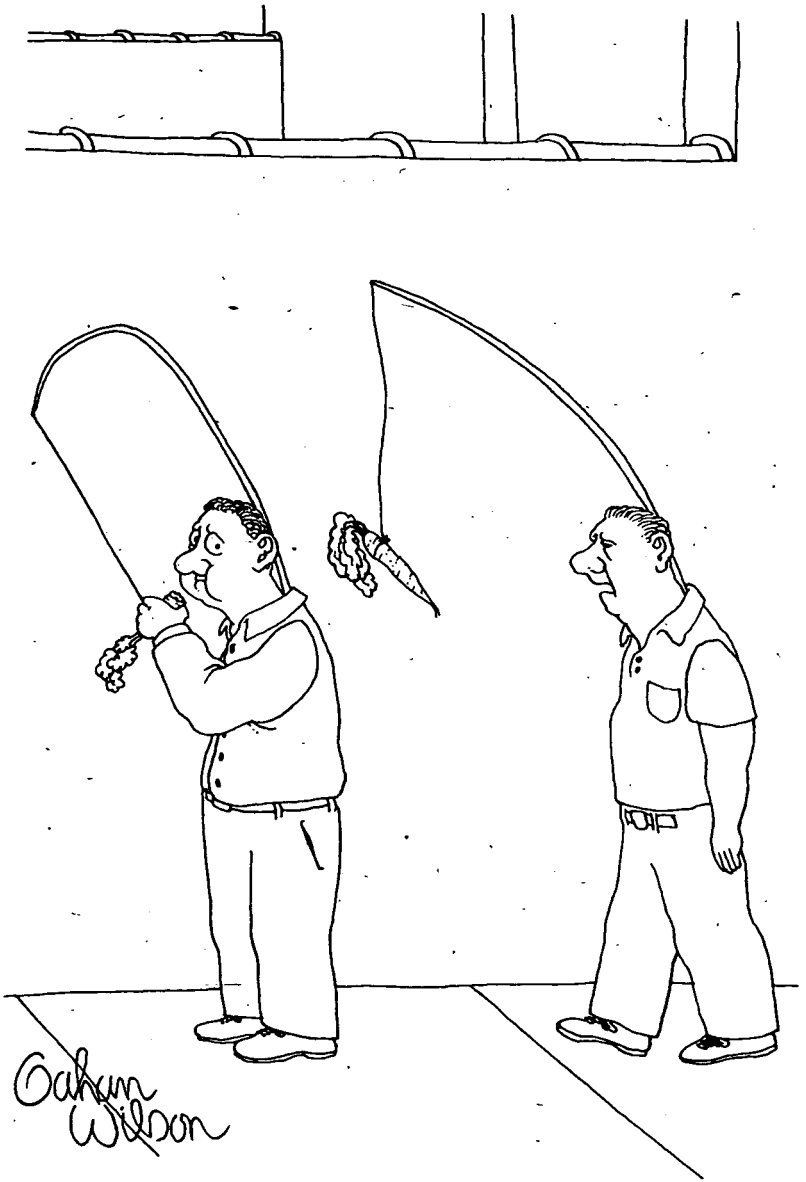


*"Alright, then* — now what are you going to do?"



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*This first-rate tale is Lori Allen's first published work. She writes: "I am a Connecticut housewife, nee New York City slum kid, graduate of Syracuse University, wife of poet and sf fan Dick Allen, mother of the science fiction fan Richard, and of the fantasy fan Tanya. I won the 1977 Writer's Digest Creative Writing Contest, but was beginning to think of myself as One Story Lori until now."*

# *And Mercy Mild*

BY

**LORI ALLEN**

*Lisa's Story*

Great-grandma was softly laughing in front of the stove, speaking words I couldn't quite understand. At first I thought it was because she was mumbling, but then I realized she was speaking in Ukrainian.

"Give her no mind," Grandma told me as she rolled out her baking powder bisquits, "this is going to be one of her better days."

"But then why....?"

She raised a floured hand to shush me. "When you get to her age, the better days are the ones to look out for."

Her age. She was ninety-six, give or take a year. They didn't keep good records on the farm.

"What's she saying?" I asked.

Grandma stopped her rolling and looked up in the air to concentrate. "'Good old-fashioned Christmas, my word, good old-fashioned Christmas, funniest thing I ever heard,'" she translated. "I told you we have to look out for the good days."

Great-grandma was tied in her rocker with strips of old sheet. I don't suppose there was anything inhumane about it — her sense of balance was gone, and if she hadn't been tied she would have fallen into the fire — but it made me uncomfortable to see her that way. Her hands were busy knitting a swatch of red wool. I knew that even if she didn't have the wool and the needles, her hands would still be knitting away; her daughter had filled them only because tomorrow was Christmas. Even now I could see the ladders Grams' dropped stitches had made.

"What was it like, Grams?" I asked her. "What was it like when you were a girl?"

"Hard," she said in English, "not good at all."

"If she's going to go into those old



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stories, will you push her into another room? I've got supper to make and I can't be bothered with her miseries. Where's your mother? She promised me she'd help."

"She said she'd be down in a minute. This is hard for her, you know, the first Christmas without Dad. Is there anything I can do?"

"I'll wait for your mother," Grandma said. She was used to widowhood, had been used to it for twenty years, and when my mother came home all broken up with my father's death and her own menopause, Grandma had little sympathy to spare. Grandma let her stay though. She could use her help with Grams, and maybe in the back of her head she realized that one day she herself might have to be tied to Grams' rocking chair.

I pushed Grams into the parlor where she could see my kids making a mess of the antimacassars. "Did you used to go to your grandmother's house for Christmas?" I asked her.

"My grandmother? My grandmother died when she was thirty one. There was the other one, my father's mother, she lived to be almost sixty but she stayed in the old country, I never saw her."

Her arthritic hands had dropped another stitch. "Here, let me help you," I said, meaning to straighten out the loops and set her swatch right, but she held onto the needles tightly. I don't think she knew I was there, or that she was talking. Her lips kept moving and sometimes words came out and sometimes they didn't; sometimes the words were in English and sometimes they weren't. At first I could barely understand her, but when I concentrated and let myself relax, the feelings came through and I think I knew what she was talking about.

She said what they did Christmas Eve was they killed what they were going to eat the next day. She said they made the kids do it, and she never liked to kill the rabbits because you had to skin them so carefully, but she didn't mind killing the capons — nobody liked the capons, especially not the hens. She said sometimes it was fun to let the capon run around without any head but the trouble with that was the feathers got bloody and then you couldn't use them. She said nothing went to waste on the farm; they used the feathers not only in pillows but in quilts and mattresses. Her mother used to fret over Grams' continual runny nose — people died of influenza in those days — it wasn't until Grams was a grown woman that she found out it was not eternal colds she was plagued with, but a feather allergy. She remembered the night her father had one too many and knocked over the candle-covered Christmas tree and ... She stopped talking in midsentence, stopped rocking, stopped knitting. I was scared, I mean she was very old, but Mom and Grandma took her to her room like it happened every day, as I guess it did.



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It was almost eleven o'clock before we finally wrestled my daughter Jennifer and my twins (who had automatically canceled my membership in ZPG) to sleep. They wanted to stay up for Santa Claus, they wanted to see where Mommy and Daddy were going to sleep, they wanted to flush the chain toilet just one more time. I never sleep well on Christmas Eve. I always think I should be somewhere else, in church maybe, and if I've gone to midnight services, it's even worse. Besides, it was freezing in that old uninsulated bedroom, and when the heat went on sometime in the middle of the night, it was suffocating.

Sleepless as I thought I was, the kids were up before me, and Grandma and Mom must have been up before them, up early enough to start the sweet dough to rise. The air was rich with the smell of yeast and sugar.

Cake for breakfast was a new thing for my kids, and when Grandma gave them mugs of warm milk laced with coffee and sugar, my toddlers turned themselves into instant little adults for as long as the milk toddies lasted.

Someone had fluffed out Grams' thinning hair and tied a bow in it, like you do to a little baby. I think it was for our benefit, not hers; I wasn't sure she knew it was there.

We watched the kids unwrap their toys — dolls, trucks, blocks, colorforms, more dolls, magnets, picture books, music boxes, more dolls, trains, games, battery-powered clowns, more dolls — unwrapped our own more conservative gifts and settled into the rut of what was left of Christmas. I knew Mom and Grandma wouldn't let me help cook; I also knew that by the end of the day they'd be so exhausted they wouldn't put up more than token objections when I offered to do the dishes — *all* the dishes, all the pots and pans, all ... but I didn't have to think about it yet.

The kids were busy with their toys and my husband was busy "helping" them. That's one of the things I like best about Frank, he's always willing to shuck off his adulthood and crawl around the floor with a truck, mowing down all the doll people.

It began to snow. First, big sloopy flakes that melted as soon as they touched ground, then the real stuff, soft feathers that stuck. I pushed Grams over to the window, at the last minute remembering to grab an afghan to tuck around her legs. We watched the snow build against the picket fence.

"Needs shoveling," she said, so softly it almost blended in with the wind, this woman who seemed to see the dark side of everything, this woman to whom Christmas meant the killing of rabbits and capons. But was it the dark side? Or was it some secret joke she was playing. Would I understand the joke when I was ninety-six, give or take a year? When she looked up at me she was smiling.

"Merry Christmas, Lisa," she said.

"Merry Christmas, Grams." I took



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the absurd bow out of her hair.

*Treena's Story*

Thank God, Joe moved out or I'd never have had room in the Air Stream for Grams. I mean our marriage contract said two years and, as things are now, that's a long time; where did he get off wanting to stick around? As it was, I had to put the clones in the same bed and all the books say you shouldn't do it but, what the hell, it's just for one night.

The home delivered Grams — I don't know how else to put it — they wheeled her down the ramp like an oversized package. I half expected to have to tear off the paper to find out what she was. What she was was my Grams, my mother's mother's mother, and, boy, you should have heard her yell when they made her move south from New England. I mean why bother wasting power on heating when we need it so much for other things — for making clones for instance, now that nearly everybody's sterile, thanks to that God-awful stuff they put in our mothers' drinking water.

Grams didn't want to come south and she didn't want to sit in the sun and she couldn't see why my mother and grandmother couldn't be here and she didn't want me to call her Grams. Her name was *Lisa*. Grams was her mother's mother's mother, an old woman, long since dead. Lisa-Grams sat there strapped to her wheel chair, almost bald, hands with so many knots you couldn't see the knuckles, and she thought she wasn't old. Well, I humored her, it was Christmas and all that, and this is what I had her brought here for, wasn't it, for me to learn about the old times? Anyway I kind of liked the old broad. She didn't look the least bit like me. When you're living with your own clones, that's quite an advantage.

"We used to go Christmas shopping," she said in that scratchy voice of hers, "the stores used to be mobbed. Once they ran out of the little-people parking garage the twins wanted and I had to get them a fire station instead but it didn't much matter, by the time Christmas came they forgot which they'd put on their lists."

Lists. That's a laugh. I know what my kids want — I should know, they're me aren't they? — they want dolls — only the toy factories were turned over to munitions long ago and what with holding down two jobs I don't have the time to make them any. I did manage to scrounge up some old clothespins. Maybe they can paint faces on them or something.

"Do you remember the trees? No of course not, how could you, we haven't had Christmas trees since your mother was a child. We used to decorate evergreens with colored electric lights, every color in the world. Some people even strung lights in their elms, and when the winds blew, they looked like friendly ghost trees come alive. And



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one year when I went to Florida I remember twinkling lights in the palm trees all up and down the boulevards of Miami Beach."

Electric lights in the palm trees, outasight. Mostly we make do with candles but all year I had been saving a flashlight battery for tomorrow. Somehow I didn't think Grams was going to appreciate it.

She went on and on. Well, I asked for it, didn't I? Only I didn't bargain on all that talk about food, not that I believed it, a turkey *and* a ham *and* roast beef all on one table? A little onion chopped in with our brown rice was a special treat for us. We were even going to have meat — a dumb rattlesnake bit one of the clones that morning but she had been immunized and it was no more than a tickle to her and there I was waiting with my chopping knife. Batter-fried snake, incredible.

Christmas would have been perfect if only Mom had come, but she hates the Air Stream even if it is almost an antique trailer and she hates the desert even worse. I tell her it's not so bad, at least she could get to see her grandchildren and then she really clams up. I think the clones make her uncomfortable. As for Grandma, she went bonkers long ago, like most of the people of her generation who just couldn't adjust to suddenly doing without all the things they were used to.

Me, I can adjust to anything — being alone, being cold nights, being a little bit hungry all the time. Sometimes, especially on Christmas Eve, I wish I could go to church though. There's this faith healer who came through a couple of years ago and he held a service you wouldn't believe — raw lizards! There wasn't too much Christ in the Christmas, but, wow, what religion!

Grams' story about the electric lights gave me an idea. I sent the clones out on the sands with buckets looking for all the nonbiodegradable plastic they could find. They came back with all kinds of stuff — razors, can tops, cups, pieces of what could have been old toys — and we stuck them all on the nearest cactus. I guess it must have looked kind of garbagy to Grams, but we liked it.

I didn't sleep much that night. I keep waking up to see if Grams was still breathing. And I felt guilty about the clones' Christmas. They were three that year, old enough so they might remember, and clothespins aren't really dolls. I did have some black market candy — they hadn't tasted sugar in I don't know how long — maybe it would be enough.

Christmas morning I pushed Grams out to sit in front of the cactus. Not that she couldn't do it herself, I swear that wheelchair works if you wiggle your eyelashes, but I kind of wanted to do something for the old lady. I put her present in her hands. It was a real orange, fresh from Florida, cost me close to a day's pay.



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"Poor Treena," she said, "thank you, but poor, poor Treena. You know when I was a girl and too little to go shopping, my mother used to give me an orange and a dish of cloves. I'd stick the cloves all over the orange — that made a pomander — and whoever I gave the pomander to would hang it in a closet so that all the clothes would smell nice."

"Grams! You're not going to hang that orange in the closet!"

"No, child. We're going to share it. Will you peel it for us, please?"

I peeled it with my fingers, not a knife, so that my hands would smell good, and I broke it into four pieces. Stacy and Tracy, the clones, stuffed it down as fast as they could, but Grams and I took a long time over ours, and when we had finished I chewed on the white inside peel.

"I have a present for your children," Grams said.

"You didn't have to do that, you're our guest."

"Tracy and Stacy, look under my afghan, right next to my feet. There should be something tied there for each of you."

The kids pulled out two boxes wrapped in what must once have been pretty paper. It was brittle and crumpled now, and it shredded before they could take it off.

"Go on, open them up," Grams said.

They were very careful, my clones. Each piece of paper, no matter how torn, had to be smoothed out and saved. Every corner of the boxes had to be lifted separately. Never before had they gotten boxed presents — maybe never again, unless things changed drastically.

When they finally got the boxes opened and the tissue paper undone, they took out twin Raggedy Anns — handmade, bright painted faces like in the story, and I was willing to bet that each had a candy heart sewed inside that said "I love you." I don't know how she could have made them with those hands of hers, but there they were.

She looked sad sitting in her wheelchair, sad and kind of happy at the same time. The Japanese have a name for it, *mono no aware*, the pity of things. "Merry Christmas, Treena," she said.

"Merry Christmas, Grams."

*Ruth's Story*

The kids just won't squat outside unless I force them, and sometimes in the middle of the night I find myself using the back of the cave, but I'm getting used to the smell, *and* the cold, *and* the wind. The thing that bothers me is the darkness, especially now that the days are so short. I remember once going to Grams' trailer and there were candles everywhere — there used to be so many animals that people could burn the fat instead of eating it.

Joe came home early again tonight — there's no game to be found any-



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where — and he looked at Grams like it was all her fault.

"We've waited long enough. Tomorrow she goes," he said.

"Not tomorrow, please, It's Christmas.

Don't give me that bullshit about Christmas.

"It's the Christmas God that got us into this in the first place. What did they expect when they stopped praying to the tree god and the water god and the fire god? How long did they think the almighty ones would be patient?"

"Joe, that's ridiculous!"

"Shaddup. First thing tomorrow we turn her loose. And if any of the rest of you give me any lip, you know what you'll get," He raised his fist threateningly.

The others were the other wives, his, the other men's, it didn't matter which, I didn't expect much from any of them. After all, all their Grams' had been lost in the bombings, and their grandmothers, and their mothers as well. All it meant to them when my Grams went was that there'd be a little more room in the cave.

Not that she wasn't helpful at first. Even though she lived in the desert (that's why she survived the bombings), she knew the city very well, and if it wasn't for her we'd never have known where to dig for supplies. But she couldn't get to the city any more. There was something wrong with her head — she kept falling down. Her hands were so warped she couldn't even dig in the dirt. A lot of our babies are born with hands like that, but Grams says her hands used to be smooth, just like mine. She also says it's thanks to God's mercy we can have children again, but sometimes I don't feel very thankful. There are so many of them. I get tired having a baby every year and I don't know how to stop. There used to be ways, Grams says, but some of them are forgotten and some of them need factories, and besides we need the kids, somebody's got to start the world over again. Only I wish more of the boys would live, poor things, they're just not strong enough. My twins are boys but people are scared of them — Joe says they remind him of clones and one of these days he's going to get rid of one of them, turn him out on the ice. I don't know whether or not I believe him. I don't know whether or not I blame him either. When I tie the babies up so they won't hurt themselves, when I send the toddlers out half-naked to gather fire scraps, when I make the five-year-olds look under tree barks for grubs, I know it's not a good world to grow up in.

The kids never play. I don't think they know what the word means. I think I've forgotten what it means too.

It's Christmas Eve. There used to be churches — I went to one once — there was singing and praying and a warm feeling — Peace on Earth, they called it, Good Will to Men.

We have peace now. Nobody has



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anything to fight with except rocks, and that doesn't count, there's no fallout from rocks. Besides, who has the energy to fight, we're all too hungry, and tired, and cold, and it's so very dark.

Good Will to Men — no, that's gone. Joe says if things get any worse we're going to have to start eating the kids. I don't want to live in that kind of world. I don't want to die either. Damn.

I saw Grams huddled up in a corner because no one would let her near the fire. I'm her clone's clone's clone, and that might just as well have been me there, seventy years from now. In a way it was me, only it's very unlikely I'll ever be that old. She used to talk about a Christmas cactus and dolls someone once made her clones — one of her clones was my grandclone — but she didn't talk much any more.

"Grams, you want me to call the dogs over?" I asked. (Dogs! Of course! Why didn't I think of it before? Surely Joe would rather eat a dog than one of the twins! Surely.)

"Dogs? What would I want them for?"

"To warm you. You look so cold and those animals generate a lot of body heat. This is going to be a two-dog night, and you don't get much colder than that."

"Those dogs — they're hungry?"

"Sure they're hungry, they've had even less food than we've had — oh, I see what you mean. Grams, those dogs are our pets, they'd never...."

I could hear her bones creak as she pulled herself into a tighter ball. "No dogs," she said.

"Have it your way."

I went to the mouth of the cave and watched the glacier creep closer. Sometimes I could hear it crack, like the lakes Grams used to skate on, or was that her grams, and what were skates anyway, she told me once but I forgot.

We can't stay here much longer. There's still land to the south and to the south of that, and somewhere it must be warm and bright. Somewhere.

Looking on the darkness, I knew Grams wouldn't come with us. Tomorrow Joe would put her out on the ice, and the worst thing was I wasn't sure it was the wrong thing to do. My Grams.

The wind and my thoughts drove me back into the cave, past my friend Mary, who was sleeping. At this stage of her pregnancy she was always hot and she had kicked away the pelt that was covering her. It was just horsehide and it smelled but it would help.

I made Grams lie down and covered her as best I could, but still her lips were blue with chill, so I spooned around her and drew her tightly to my pregnant belly. My Grams would not be cold on this last Christmas Eve.

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*Edward Bryant ("Teeth Marks," June 1979; "Stone," Feb. 1978) returns with a gripping story about an encounter with a ghost from the distant past in the Rocky Mountain West. Mr. Bryant has two story collections coming out this year: PARTICLE THEORY from Pocket Books and PRAIRIE SUN from Jelm Mountain Publications.*

# Strata

BY

**EDWARD BRYANT**

Six hundred million years in thirty-two miles. Six hundred million years in fifty-one minutes. Steve Mavrakis traveled in time — courtesy of the Wyoming Highway Department. The epochs raveled between Thermopolis and Shoshoni. The Wind River rambled down its canyon with the Burlington Northern tracks cut into the west walls and the two-lane blacktop, U.S. 20, sliced into the east. Official signs driven into the verge of the highway proclaimed the traveler's progress:

DINWOODY FORMATION
TRIASSIC
185-225 MILLION YEARS

BIG HORN FORMATION
ORDOVICIAN
440-500 MILLION YEARS

FLATHEAD FORMATION
CAMBRIAN
500-600 MILLION YEARS

The mileposts might have been staked into the canyon rock under the pressure of millennia. They were there for those who could not read the stone. Tonight Steve ignored the signs. He had made this run many times before. Darkness hemmed him. November clawed when he cracked the window to exhaust Camel smoke from the Chevy's cab. The CB crackled occasionally and picked up exactly nothing.

The wind blew — that was nothing unusual. Steve felt himself hypnotized by the skiff of snow skating across the pavement in the glare of his brights. The snow swirled only inches above the blacktop, rushing across like surf sliding over the black packed sand of a beach.



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*Time's predator hunts.*

*Years scatter before her like a school of minnows surprised. The rush of her passage causes eons to eddy. Wind sweeps down the canyon with the roar of combers breaking on the sand. The moon, full and newly risen, exerts its tidal force.*

*Moonlight flashes on the slash of teeth.*

And Steve snapped alert, realized he had traversed the thirty-two miles, crossed the flats leading into Shoshoni, and was approaching the junction with U.S. 26. Road hypnosis? he thought. Safe in Shoshoni, but it was scary. He didn't remember a goddamned minute of the trip through the canyons! Steve rubbed his eyes with his left hand and looked for an open cafe with coffee.

It hadn't been the first time.

All those years before, the four of them had thought they were beating the odds. On a chill night in June, high on a mountain edge in the Wind River Range, high on more than mountain air, the four of them celebrated graduation. They were young and clear-eyed: ready for the world. That night they knew there were no other people for miles. Having learned in class that there were 3.8 human beings per square mile in Wyoming, and as *four*, they thought the odds outnumbered.

Paul Onoda, eighteen. He was second-generation Wyoming; third-generation Nisei. In 1942, before he was conceived, his parents were removed with eleven hundred thousand other Japanese-Americans from California to the Heart Mountain Relocation Center in northern Wyoming. Twelve members and three generations of the Onodas shared one of four hundred and sixty-five crowded, tar-papered barracks for the next four years. Two died. Three more were born. With their fellows, the Onodas helped farm eighteen hundred acres of virgin agricultural land. Not all of them had been Japanese gardeners or truck farmers in California; so the pharmacists and the teachers and the carpenters learned agriculture. They used irrigation to bring in water. The crops flourish. The Nisei not directly involved with farming were dispatched from camp to be seasonal farm laborers. An historian later laconically noted that "Wyoming benefited by their presence."

Paul remembered the Heart Mountain camps only through the memories of his elders, but those recollections were vivid. After the war, most of the Onodas stayed on in Wyoming. With some difficulty, they bought farms. The family invested thrice the effort of their neighbors, and prospered.

Paul Onoda excelled in the classrooms and starred on the football field of Fremont High School. Once he overheard the president of the school board tell the coach, "By God but that little nip can run!" He thought about that, and kept on running even faster.

More than a few of his classmates secretly thought he had it all. When



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prom time came in his senior year, it did not go unnoticed that Paul had an extraordinarily handsome appearance to go with his brains and athlete's body. In and around Fremont, a great many concerned parents admonished their white daughters to find a good excuse if Paul asked them to the prom.

Carroll Dale, eighteen. It became second nature early on to explain to people first hearing her given name that it had two r's and two l's. Both sides of her family went back four generations in this part of the country, and one of her bequests had been a proud mother. Cordelia Carroll had pride, one daughter, and the desire to see the hereford Carrolls retain *some* parity with the charolais Dales. After all, the Carrolls had been ranching on Bad Water Creek before John Broderick Okie illuminated his Lost Cabin castle with carbide lights. That was when Teddy Roosevelt had been President, and it was when all the rest of the cattlemen in Wyoming, including the Dales, had been doing their accounts at night by kerosene lanterns.

Carroll grew up to be a good roper and a better rider. Her apprenticeship intensified after her older brother, her only brother, fatally shot himself during deer season. She wounded her parents when she neither married a man who would take over the ranch nor decided to take over the ranch herself.

She grew up slim and tall, with ebony hair and large, dark, slightly oblique eyes. Her father's father, at family Christmas dinners, would overdo the whisky in the eggnog and make jokes about Indians in the woodpile until her paternal grandmother would tell him to shut the hell up before she gave him a goodnight the hard way, with a rusty sickle and knitting needles. It was years before Carroll knew what her grandmother meant.

In junior high, Carroll was positive she was eight feet tall in Lilliput. The jokes hurt. But her mother told her to be patient, that the other girls would catch up. Most of the girls didn't; but in high school the boys did, though they tended to be tongue-tied in the extreme when they talked to her.

She was the first girl president of her school's National Honor Society. She was a cheerleader. She was the valedictorian of her class and earnestly quoted John F. Kennedy in her graduation address. Within weeks of graduation, she eloped with the captain of the football team.

It nearly caused a lynching.

Steve Mavrakis, eighteen. Courtesy allowed him to be called a native despite his birth eighteen hundred miles to the east. His parents, on the other hand, had settled in the state after the war when he was less than a year old. Given another decade, the younger native-born might grudgingly concede their adopted roots; the old-timers, never.

Steve's parents had read Zane Grey and *The Virginian*, and had spent many summers on dude ranches in up-



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state New York. So they found a perfect ranch on the Big Horn River and started a herd of registered hereford. They went 'broke. They re-financed and aimed at a breed of inferior beef cattle. The snows of '49 killed those. Steve's father determined that sheep were the way to go — all those double and triple births. Very investment-effective. The sheep sickened, or stumbled and fell into creeks where they drowned, or panicked like turkeys and smothered in heaps in fenced corners. It occurred then to the Mavrakis family that wheat doesn't stampede. All the fields were promptly hailed out before what looked to be a bounty harvest. Steve's father gave up and moved into town where he put his Columbia degree to work by getting a job managing the district office for the Bureau of Land Management.

All of that taught Steve to be wary of sure things.

And occasionally he wondered at the dreams. He had been very young when the blizzards killed the cattle. But though he didn't remember the National Guard dropping hay bales from silver C-47's to cattle in twelve-foot deep snow, he did recall, for years after, the nightmares of herds of nonplused animals futilely grazing barren ground before towering, slowly grinding, bluffs of ice.

The night after the cropduster terrified the sheep and seventeen had expired in paroxysms, Steve dreamed of brown men shrilling and shaking sticks and stampeding tusked, hairy monsters off a precipice and down hundreds of feet to a shallow stream.

Summer nights Steve woke sweating, having dreamed of reptiles slithering and warm waves beating on a ragged beach in the lower pasture. He sat straight, staring out the bedroom window, watching the giant ferns waver and solidify back into cottonwood and box elder.

The dreams came less frequently and vividly as he grew older. He willed that. They altered when the family moved into Fremont. After a while Steve still remembered he had had the dreams, but most of the details were forgotten.

At first the teachers in Fremont High School thought he was stupid. Steve was administered tests and thereafter was labeled an underachiever. He did what he had to do to get by. He barely qualified for the college-bound program, but then his normally easy-going father made threats. People asked him what he wanted to do, to be, and he answered honestly that he didn't know. Then he took a speech class. Drama fascinated him and he developed a passion for what theater the school offered. He played well in *Our Town* and *Arsenic and Old Lace* and *Harvey*. The drama coach looked at Steve's average height and average looks and average brown hair and eyes, and suggested at a hilarious cast party that he become either a character actor or an FBI agent.



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By this time, the only dreams Steve remembered were sexual fantasies about girls he didn't dare ask on dates.

Ginger McClelland, seventeen. Who could blame her for feeling out of place? Having been born on the cusp of the school district's regulations, she was very nearly a year younger than her classmates. She was short. She thought of herself as a dwarf in a world of Snow Whites. It didn't help that her mother studiously offered words like "petite" and submitted that the most gorgeous clothes would fit a wearer under five feet, two inches. Secretly she hoped that in one mysterious night she would bloom and grow great, long legs like Carroll Dale. That never happened.

Being an exile in an alien land didn't help either. Though Carroll had befriended her, she had listened to the president of the pep club, the queen of Job's Daughters, and half the girls in her math class refer to her as "the foreign exchange student." Except that she would never be repatriated home; at least not until she graduated. Her parents had tired of living in Cupertino, California, and thought that running a coast-to-coast hardware franchise in Fremont would be an adventurous change of pace. They loved the open spaces, the mountains and free-flowing streams. Ginger wasn't so sure. Every day felt like she had stepped into a time machine. All the music on the radio was old. The movies that turned up at the town's one theater — forget it. The dancing at the hops was grotesque.

Ginger McClelland was the first person in Fremont—and perhaps in all of Wyoming—to use the adjective "bitchin'." It got her sent home from study hall and caused a bemused and confusing interview beteen her parents and the principal.

Ginger learned not to trust most of the boys who invited her out on dates. They all seemed to feel some sort of perverse mystique about California girls. But she did accept Steve Mavrakis's last-minute invitation to the prom. He seemed safe enough.

Because Carroll and Ginger were friends, the four of them ended up double-dating in Paul's father's old maroon DeSoto that was customarily used for hauling fence posts and wire out to the pastures. After the dance, when nearly everyone else was heading to one of the sanctioned after-prom parties, Steve affably obtained from an older intermediary an entire case of chilled Hamms. Ginger and Carroll had brought along jeans and Pendleton shirts in their overnight bags and changed in the restroom at the Chevron station. Paul and Steve took off their white jackets and donned windbreakers. Then they all drove up into the Wind River Range. After they ran out of road, they hiked. It was very late and very dark. But they found a high mountain place where they huddled and drank beer and talked and necked.



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They heard the voice of the wind and nothing else beyond that. They saw no lights of cars or outlying cabins. The isolation exhilarated them. They *knew* there was no one else for miles.

That was correct so far as it went.

Foam hissed and sprayed as Paul applied the church key to the cans. Above and below them, the wind broke like waves on the rocks.

"Mavrakis, you're going to the university, right?" said Paul.

Steve nodded in the dim moonlight, added, "I guess so."

"What're you going to take?" said Ginger, snuggling close and burping slightly on her beer.

"I don't know; engineering, I guess. If you're a guy and in the college-bound program, you end up taking engineering. So I figure that's it."

Paul said, "What kind?"

"Don't know. Maybe aerospace. I'll move to Seattle and make spaceships."

"That's neat," said Ginger. "Like in *The Outer Limits*. I wish we could get that here."

"You ought to be getting into hydraulic engineering," said Paul. "Water's going to be really big business not too long from now."

"I don't think I want to stick around Wyoming."

Carroll had been silently staring out over the valley. She turned back toward Steve and her eyes were pools of darkness. "You're really going to leave?"

"Yeah."

"And never come back?"

"Why should I?" said Steve. "I've had all the fresh air and wide-open spaces I can use for a lifetime. You know something? I've never even seen the ocean." *And yet he had* felt *the ocean*. He blinked. "I'm getting out."

"Me too," said Ginger. "I'm going to stay with my aunt and uncle in L.A. I think I can probably get into the U.S.C. journalism school."

"Got the money?" said Paul.

"I'll get a scholarship."

"Aren't you leaving?" Steve said to Carroll.

"Maybe," she said. "Sometimes I think so, and then I'm not so sure."

"You'll come back even if you do leave," said Paul. "All of you'll come back."

"Says who?" Steve and Ginger said it almost simultaneously.

"The land gets into you," said Carroll. "Paul's dad says so."

"That's what he says." They all heard anger in Paul's voice. He opened another round of cans. Ginger tossed her empty away and it clattered down the rocks, a noise jarringly out of place.

"Don't," said Carroll. "We'll take the empties down in the sack."

"What's wrong?" said Ginger. "I mean, I...." Her voice trailed off and everyone was silent for a minute, two minutes, three.



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"What about you, Paul?" said Carroll. "Where do you want to go? What do you want to do?"

"We talked about—" His voice sounded suddenly tightly controlled. "Damn it, I don't know now. If I come back, it'll be with an atomic bomb—"

"What?" said Ginger.

Paul smiled. At least Steve could see white teeth gleaming in the night. "As for what I want to do—" He leaned forward and whispered in Carroll's ear.

She said, "Jesus, Paul! We've got witnesses."

"What?" Ginger said again.

"Don't even ask you don't want to know." She made it one continuous sentence. Her teeth also were visible in the near-darkness. "Try that and I've got a mind to goodnight you the hard way."

"What're you talking about?" said Ginger.

Paul laughed. "Her grandmother."

"Charlie Goodnight was a big rancher around the end of the century," Carroll said. "He trailed a lot of cattle up from Texas. Trouble was, a lot of his expensive bulls weren't making out so well. Their testicles—"

"Balls," said Paul.

"—kept dragging on the ground," she continued. "The bulls got torn up and infected. So Charlie Goodnight started getting his bulls ready for the overland trip with some amateur surgery. He'd cut into the scrotum and shove the balls up into the bull. Then he's stitch up the sack and there'd be no problem with high-centering. That's called goodnighting."

"See," said Paul. "There are ways to beat the land."

Carroll said," 'You do what you've got to.' That's a quote from my father. Good pioneer stock."

"But not to me." Paul pulled her close and kissed her.

"Maybe we ought to explore the mountain a little," said Ginger to Steve. "You want to come with me?" She stared at Steve who was gawking at the sky as the moonlight suddenly vanished like a light-switching off.

"Oh my God."

"What's wrong?" she said to the shrouded figure.

"I don't know—I mean, nothing, I guess." The moon appeared again. "Was that a cloud?"

"I don't see a cloud," said Paul, gesturing at the broad belt of stars. "The night's clear."

"Maybe you saw a UFO," said Carroll, her voice light.

"You okay?" Ginger touched his face. "Jesus, you're shivering." She held him tightly.

Steve's words were almost too low to hear. "It swam across the moon."

"What did?"

"I'm cold too," said Carroll. "Let's go back down." Nobody argued. Ginger remembered to put the metal cans into a paper sack and tied it to her belt with a hair-ribbon. Steve didn't say anything more for a while, but the



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others all could hear his teeth chatter. When they were halfway down, the moon finally set beyond the valley rim. Farther on, Paul stepped on a loose patch of shale, slipped, cursed, began to slide beyond the lip of the sheer rock face. Carroll grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"Thanks, Irene." His voice shook slightly, belying the tone of the words.

"Funny," she said.

"I don't get it," said Ginger.

Paul whistled a few bars of the song.

"Good night," said Carroll. "You do what you've got to."

"And I'm grateful for that." Paul took a deep breath. "Let's get down to the car."

When they were on the winding road and driving back toward Fremont, Ginger said, "What did you see up there, Steve?"

"Nothing. I guess I just remembered a dream."

"Some dream." She touched his shoulder. "You're still cold."

Carroll said, "So am I."

Paul took his right hand off the wheel to cover her hand. "We all are."

"I feel all right." Ginger sounded puzzled.

All the way into town, Steve felt he had drowned.

The Amble Inn in Thermopolis was built in the shadow of Round Top Mountain. On the slope above the inn, huge letters formed from whitewashed stones proclaimed: WORLD'S LARGEST MINERAL HOT SPRING. Whether at night or noon, the inscription invariably reminded Steve of the Hollywood Sign. Early in his return from California, he realized the futility of jumping off the second letter "O." The stones were laid flush with the steep pitch of the ground. Would-be suicides could only roll down the hill until they collided with the log side of the Inn.

On Friday and Saturday night, the parking lot of the Amble Inn was filled almost exclusively with four-wheel-drive vehicles and conventional pickups. Most of them had black-enameled gun racks up in the rear window behind the seat. Steve's Chevy had a rack, but that was because he had bought the truck used. He had considered buying a toy rifle, one that shot caps or rubber darts, at a Penney's Christmas catalog sale. But like so many other projects, he never seemed to get around to it.

Tonight was the first Saturday night in June, and Steve had money in his pocket from the paycheck he had cashed at Safeway. He had no reason to celebrate, but then he had no reason not to celebrate. So a little after nine he went to the Amble Inn to drink tequila hookers and listen to the music.

The inn was uncharacteristically crowded for so early in the evening, but Steve secured a small table close to the dance floor when a guy threw up and his girl had to take him home. Dancing couples covered the floor



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though the headline act, The Radford & Lewis Band, wouldn't be on until eleven. The warmup group was a Montana band called the Great Falls Dead. They had more enthusiasm than talent, but they had the crowd dancing.

Steve threw down the shots, sucked limes, licked the salt, intermittently tapped his hand on the table to the music, and felt vaguely melancholy. Smoke drifted around him, almost as thick as the special-effects fog in a bad horror movie. The inn's dance floor was in a dim, domed room lined with rough pine.

He suddenly stared, puzzled by a flash of near-recognition. He had been watching one dancer in particular, a tall woman with curly raven hair, who had danced with a succession of cowboys. When he looked at her face, he thought he saw someone familiar. When he looked at her body, he wondered whether she wore underwear beneath the wide-weave red knit dress.

The Great Falls Dead launched into "Good-hearted Woman" and the floor was instantly filled with dancers. Across the room, someone squealed, "Willieee!" This time the woman in red danced very close to Steve's table. Her high cheekbones looked hauntingly familiar. Her hair, he thought. If it were longer— She met his eyes and smiled at him.

The set ended, her partner drifted off toward the bar, but she remained standing beside his table. "Carroll?" he said. *"Carroll?"*

She stood there smiling, with right hand on hip. "I wondered when you'd figure it out."

Steve shoved his chair back and got up from the table. She moved very easily into his arms for a hug. "It's been a long time."

"It has."

"Fourteen years? Fifteen?"

"Something like that."

He asked her to sit at his table, and she did. She sipped a Campari-and-tonic as they talked. He switched to beer. The years unreeled. The Great Falls Dead pounded out a medley of country standards behind them.

"...I never should have married, Steve. I was wrong for Paul. He was wrong for me."

"...*thought* about getting married. I met a lot of women in Hollywood, but nothing ever seemed..."

"...all the wrong reasons..."

"...did end up in a few made-for-TV movies. Bad stuff. I was always cast as the assistant manager in a holdup scene, or got killed by the werewolf right near the beginning. I think there's something like ninety percent of all actors who are unemployed at any given moment, so I said..."

"You really came back here? How long ago?"

"...to hell with it..."

"How long ago?"

"...and sort of slunk back to Wyoming. I don't know. Several years



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ago. How long were you married, anyway?"

"...a year more or less. What do you do here?"

"...beer's getting warm. Think I'll get a pitcher..."

"What do you do here?"

"...better cold. Not much. I get along. You..."

"...lived in Taos for a time. Then Santa Fe. Bummed around the Southwest a lot. A friend got me into photography. Then I was sick for a while and that's when I tried painting..."

"...landscapes of the Tetons to sell to tourists?"

"Hardly. A lot of landscapes, but trailer camps and oil fields and perspective vistas of I-80 across the Red Desert..."

"I tried taking pictures once...kept forgetting to load the camera."

"...and then I ended up half-owner of a gallery called Good Stuff. My partner throws pots."

"...must be dangerous..."

"...located on Main Street in Lander..."

"...going through. Think maybe I've seen it..."

"What do you do here?"

The comparative silence seemed to echo as the band ended its set. "Very little," said Steve. "I worked a while as a hand on the Two-bar. Spent some time being a roughneck in the fields up around Buffalo. I've got a pickup—do some short-hauling for local businessmen who don't want to hire a trucker. I ran a little pot. Basically I do whatever I can find. You know."

Carroll said, "Yes, I do know." The silence lengthened between them. Finally she said, "Why did you come back here? Was it because—"

"—because I'd failed?" Steve said, answering her hesitation. He looked at her steadily. "I thought about that a long time. I decided that I could fail anywhere, so I came back here." He shrugged. "I love it. I love the space."

"A lot of us have come back," Carroll said. "Ginger and Paul are here."

Steve was startled. He looked at the tables around them.

"Not tonight," said Carroll. "We'll see them tomorrow. They want to see you."

"Are you and Paul back—" he started to say.

She held up her palm. "Hardly. We're not exactly on the same wavelength. That's one thing that hasn't changed. He ended up being the sort of thing you thought you'd become."

Steve didn't remember what that was.

"Paul went to the School of Mines in Colorado. Now he's the chief exploratory geologist for Enerco."

"Not bad," said Steve.

"Not good," said Carroll. "He spent a decade in South America and the Middle East. Now he's come back home. He wants to gut the state like a fish."

"Coal?"



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"And oil. And uranium. And gas. Enerco's got its thumb in a lot of holes." Her voice had lowered, sounded angry. "Anyay, we *are* having a reunion tomorrow, of sorts. And Ginger will be there."

Steve poured out the last of the beer. "I thought for sure she'd be in California."

"Never made it," said Carroll. "Scholarships fell through. Parents said they wouldn't support her if she went back to the West Coast—you know how 105-percent converted immigrants are. So Ginger went to school in Laramie and ended up with a degree in elementary education. She did marry a grad student in journalism. After the divorce five or six years later, she let him keep the kid."

Steve said, "So Ginger never got to be an ace reporter."

Steve said, "So Ginger never got to be an ace reporter."

"Oh, she did. Now she's the best writer the Salt Creek *Gazette's* got. Ginger's the darling of the environmental groups and the bane of the energy corporations."

"I'll be damned," he said. He accidentally knocked his glass off the table with his forearm. Reaching to retrieve the glass, he knocked over the empty pitcher.

"I think you're tired," Carroll said.

"I think you're right."

"You ought to go home and sack out." He nodded. "I don't want to drive all the way back to Lander tonight," Carroll said. "Have you got room for me?"

When they reached the small house Steve rented off Highway 170, Carroll grimaced at the heaps of dirty clothes making soft moraines in the living room. "I'll clear off the couch," she said. "I've got a sleeping bag in my car."

Steve hesitated a long several seconds and lightly touched her shoulders. "You don't have to sleep on the couch unless you want to. All those years ago.... You know, all through high school I had a crush on you? I was too shy to say anything."

She smiled and allowed his hands to remain. "I thought you were pretty nice too. A little shy, but cute. Definitely an underachiever."

They remained standing, faces a few inches apart, for a while longer. "Well?" he said.

"It's been a lot of years," Carroll said. "I'll sleep on the couch."

Steve said disappointedly, "Not even out of charity?"

"Especially not for charity." She smiled. "But don't discount the future." She kissed him gently on the lips.

Steve slept soundly that night. He dreamed of sliding endlessly through a warm, fluid current. It was not a nightmare. Not even when he realized he had fins rather than hands and feet.



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Morning brought rain.

When he awoke, the first thing Steve heard was the drumming of steady drizzle on the roof. The daylight outside the window was filtered gray by the sheets of water running down the pane. Steve leaned off the bed, picked up his watch from the floor, but it had stopped. He heard the sounds of someone moving in the living room and called, "Carroll? You up?"

Her voice was a soft contralto. "I am."

"What time is it?"

"Just after eight."

Steve started to get out of bed, but groaned and clasped the crown of his head with both hands. Carroll stood framed in the doorway and looked sympathetic. "What time's the reunion?" he said.

"When we get there. I called Paul a little earlier. He's tied up with some sort of meeting in Casper until late afternoon. He wants us to meet him in Shoshoni."

"What about Ginger?"

They both heard the knock on the front door. Carroll turned her head away from the bedroom, then looked back at Steve. "Right on cue," she said. "Ginger didn't want to wait until tonight." She started for the door, said back over her shoulder, "You might want to put on some clothes."

Steve pulled on his least filthy jeans and a sweatshirt labeled AMAX TOWN-LEAGUE VOLLEYBALL across the chest. He heard the front door open and close, and words murmured in his living room. When he exited the bedroom he found Carroll talking on the couch with a short blonde stranger who only slightly resembled the long-ago image he'd packed in his mind. Her hair was long and tied in a braid. Her gaze was direct and more inquisitive than he remembered.

She looked up at him and said, "I like the mustache. You look a hell of a lot better now than you ever did then."

"Except for the mustache," Steve said, "I could say the same."

The two women seemed amazed when Steve negotiated the disaster area that was the kitchen and extracted eggs and Chinese vegetables from the refrigerator. He served the huge omelet with toast and freshly brewed coffee in the living room. They all balanced plates on laps.

"Do you ever read the Gazoo?" said Ginger.

"Gazoo?"

"The Salt Creek *Gazette*," said Carroll.

Steve said, "I don't read any papers."

"I just finished a piece on Paul's company," said Ginger.

"Enerco?" Steve refilled all their cups.

Ginger shook her head. "A wholly owned subsidiary called Native



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American Resources. Pretty clever, huh?" Steve looked blank. "Not a poor damned Indian in the whole operation. The name's strictly sham while the company's been picking up an incredible number of mineral leases on the reservation. Paul's been concentrating on an enormous new coal field his teams have mapped out. It makes up a substantial proportion of the reservation's best lands."

"Including some sacred sites," said Carroll.

"Nearly a million acres," said Ginger. "That's more than a thousand square miles."

"The land's never the same," said Carroll, "no matter how much goes into reclamation, no matter how tight the EPA says they are."

Steve looked from one to the other. "I may not read the papers," he said, "but no one's holding a gun to anyone else's head."

"Might as well be," said Ginger. "If the Native American Resources deal goes through, the mineral royalty payments to the tribes'll go up preciptiously."

Steve spread his palms. "Isn't that good?"

Ginger shook her head vehemently. "It's economic blackmail to keep the tribes from developing their own resources at their own pace."

"Slogans," said Steve. "The country needs the energy. If the tribes don't have the investment capital—"

"They *would* if they weren't bought off with individual royalty payments."

"The tribes have a choice—"

"—with the prospect of immediate gain dangled in front of them by NAR."

"I can tell it's Sunday," said Steve, "even if I haven't been inside a church door in fifteen years. I'm being preached at."

"If you'd get off your ass and think," said Ginger, "nobody'd have to lecture you."

Steve grinned. "I don't think with my ass."

"Look," said Carroll. "It's stopped raining."

Ginger glared at Steve. He took advantage of Carroll's diversion and said, "Anyone for a walk?"

The air outside was cool and rain-washed. It soothed tempers. The trio walked through the fresh morning along the cottonwood-lined creek. Meadowlarks sang. The rain front had moved far to the east; the rest of the sky was bright blue.

"Hell of a country, isn't it?" said Steve.

"Not for much longer if—" Ginger began.

"Gin," Carroll said warningly.

They strolled for another hour, angling south where they could see the hills as soft as blanket folds. The tree-lined draws snaked like green veins down the hillsides. The earth, Steve thought, seemed gathered, somehow expectant.



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"How's Danny?" Carroll said to Ginger.

"He's terrific. Kid wants to become an astronaut." A grin split her face. "Bob's letting me have him for August."

"Look at that," said Steve, pointing.

The women looked. "I don't see anything," said Ginger.

"Southeast," Steve said. "Right above the head of the canyon."

"There—I'm not sure." Carroll shaded her eyes. "I thought I saw something, but it was just a shadow."

"Nothing there," said Ginger.

"Are you both blind?" said Steve, astonished. "There was something in the air. It was dark and cigar-shaped. It was there when I pointed."

"Sorry," said Ginger, "didn't see a thing."

"Well, it *was* there," Steve said, disgruntled.

Carroll continued to stare off toward the pass. "I saw it too, but just for a second. I didn't see where it went."

"Damnedest thing. I don't think it was a plane. It just sort of cruised along, and then it was gone."

"All I saw was something blurry," Carroll said. "Maybe it was a UFO."

"Oh, you guys," Ginger said with an air of dawning comprehension. "Just like prom night, right? Just a joke."

Steve slowly shook his head. "I really saw something then, and I saw this now. This time Carroll saw it too." She nodded in agreement. He tasted salt.

The wind started to rise from the north, kicking up early spring weeds that had already died and begun to dry.

"I'm getting cold," said Ginger. "Let's go back to the house."

"Steve," said Carroll, "you're shaking."

They hurried him back across the land.

## PHOSPHORIC FORMATION
## PERMIAN
## 225-270 MILLION YEARS

They rested for a while at the house; drank coffee and talked of the past, of what had happened and what had not. Then Carroll suggested they leave for the reunion. After a small confusion, Ginger rolled up the windows and locked her Saab, and Carroll locked her Pinto.

"I hate having to do this," said Carroll.

"There's no choice any more," Steve said. "Too many people around now who don't know the rules."

The three of them got into Steve's pickup. In fifteen minutes they had traversed the doglegs of U.S. 20 through Thermopolis and crossed the Big Horn River. They passed the massive mobile-home park with its trailers and RV's sprawling in carapaced glitter.



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The flood of hot June sunshine washed over them as they passed between the twin bluffs, red with iron, and descended into the miles and years of canyon.

TENSLEEP FORMATION
PENNSYLVANIAN
270-310 MILLION YEARS

On both sides of the canyon, the rock layers lay stacked like sections from a giant meat slicer. In the pickup cab, the passengers had been listening to the news on KTWO. As the canyon deepened, the reception faded until only a trickle of static came from the speaker. Carroll clicked the radio off.

"They're screwed," said Ginger.

"Not necessarily." Carroll, riding shotgun, stared out the window at the slopes of flowers the same color as the bluffs. "The BIA's still got hearings. There'll be another tribal vote."

Ginger said again, "They're screwed. Money doesn't just talk—it makes obscene phone calls, you know? Paul's got this one bagged. You know Paul—I know him just about as well. Son of a bitch."

"Sorry there's no music," said Steve. "Tape player busted a while back and I've never fixed it."

They ignored him. "Damn it," said Ginger. "It took almost fifteen years, but I've learned to love this country."

"I know that," said Carroll.

No one said anything for a while. Steve glanced to his right and saw tears running down Ginger's cheeks. She glared back at him defiantly. "There's Kleenexes in the glove box," he said.

MADISON FORMATION
MISSISSIPPIAN
310-350 MILLION YEARS

The slopes of the canyon became more heavily forested. The walls were all shades of green, deeper green where the runoff had found channels. Steve felt time collect in the great gash in the earth, press inward.

"I don't feel so hot," said Ginger.

"Want to stop for a minute?"

She nodded and put her hand over her mouth.

Steve pulled the pickup over across both lanes. The Chevy skidded slightly as it stopped on the graveled turnout. Steve turned off the key, and in the sudden silence they heard only the light wind and the tickings as the Chevy's engine cooled.

"Excuse me," said Ginger. They all got out of the cab. Ginger quickly moved through the Canadian thistle and the currant bushes and into the beyond. Steve and Carroll heard her throwing up.

"She had an affair with Paul," Carroll said casually. "Not too long ago. He's an extremely attractive man." Steve said nothing. "Ginger ended it. She still feels the tension." Carroll strolled over to the side of the thistle patch and hunkered down. "Look at this."



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Steve realized how complex the ground cover was. Like the rock cliffs, it was layered. At first he saw among the sunflowers and dead dandelions only the wild sweetpeas with their blue blossoms like spades with the edges curled inward.

"Look closer," said Carroll.

Steve saw the hundreds of tiny purple moths swooping and swarming only inches from the earth. The creatures were the same color as the low purple blooms he couldn't identify. Intermixed were white, bell-shaped blossoms with leaves that looked like primeval ferns.

"It's like going back in time," said Carroll. "It's a whole, nearly invisible world we never see."

The shadow crossed them with an almost subliminal flash, but they both looked up. Between them and the sun had been the wings of a large bird. It circled in a tight orbit, banking steeply when it approached the canyon wall. The creature's belly was dirty white, muting to an almost-black on its back. It seemed to Steve that the bird's eye was fixed on them. The eye was a dull black, like unpolished obsidian.

"That's one I've never seen," said Carroll. "What is it?"

"I don't know. The wingspread's got to be close to ten feet. The markings are strange. Maybe it's a hawk? An eagle?"

The bird's beak was heavy and blunt, curved slightly. As it circled, wings barely flexing to ride the thermals, the bird was eerily silent, pelagic, fish-like.

"What's it doing?" said Carroll.

"Watching us?" said Steve. He jumped as a hand touched his shoulder.

"Sorry," said Ginger. "I feel better now." She tilted her head back at the great circling bird. "I have a feeling our friend wants us to leave."

They left. The highway wound around a massive curtain of stone in which red splashed down through the strata like dinosaur blood. Around the curve, Steve swerved to miss a deer dead on the pavement—half a deer, rather. The animal's body had been truncated cleanly just in front of its haunches.

"Jesus," said Ginger. "What did that?"

"Must have been a truck," said Steve. "An eighteen-wheeler can really tear things up when its barreling."

Carroll looked back toward the carcass and the sky beyond. "Maybe that's what our friend was protecting."

GROS VENTRE FORMATION
CAMBRIAN
500-600 MILLION YEARS

"You know, this was all under water once," said Steve. He was answered only with silence. "Just about all of Wyoming was covered with an ancient sea. That accounts for a lot of the coal." No one said anything. "I think it was called the Sun-



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dance Sea. You know, like in the Sundance Kid. Some Exxon geologist told me that in a bar."

He turned and looked at the two women. And stared. And turned back to the road blindly. And then stared at them again. It seemed to Steve that he was looking at a double exposure, or a triple exposure, or—he couldn't count all the overlays. He started to say something, but could not. He existed in a silence that was also stasis, the death of all motion. He could only see.

Carroll and Ginger faced straight ahead. They looked as they had earlier in the afternoon. They also looked as they had fifteen years before. Steve saw them *in process*, lines blurred. And Steve saw skin merge with feathers, and then scales. He saw gill openings appear, vanish, reappear on textured necks.

And then both of them turned to look at him. Their heads swiveled slowly, smoothly. Four reptilian eyes watched him, unblinking and incurious.

Steve wanted to look away.

The Chevy's tires whined on the level blacktop. The sign read:

SPEED ZONE AHEAD
35 MPH

"Are you awake?" said Ginger.

Steve shook his head to clear it. "Sure," he said. "You know that reverie you sometimes get into when you're driving? When you can drive miles without consciously thinking about it, and then suddenly you realize what's happened?"

Ginger nodded.

"That's what happened."

The highway passed between modest frame houses, gas stations, motels. They entered Shoshoni.

There was a brand new WELCOME TO SHOSHONI sign, as yet without bullet holes. The population figure had again been revised upward. "Want to bet on when they break another thousand?" said Carroll.

Ginger shook her head silently.

Steve pulled up to the stop sign. "Which way?"

Carroll said, "Go left."

"I think I've got it." Steve saw the half-ton truck with the Enerco decal and NATIVE AMERICAN RESOURCES DIVISION labeled below that on the door. It was parked in front of the Yellowstone Drugstore. "Home of the world's greatest shakes and malts," said Steve. "Let's go."

The interior of the Yellowstone had always reminded him of nothing so much as an old-fashioned pharmacy blended with the interior of the cafe in *Bad Day at Black Rock*. They found Paul at a table nursing a chocolate malted.

He looked up, smiled, said, "I've gained four pounds this afternoon. If you'd been any later, I'd probably have become diabetic."



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Paul looked far older than Steve had expected. Ginger and Carroll both appeared older than they had been a decade and a half before, but Paul seemed to have aged thirty years in fifteen. The star quarterback's physique had gone a bit to pot. His face was creased with lines emphasized by the leathery curing of skin that has been exposed years to wind and hot sun. Paul's hair, black as coal, was streaked with *firn*-lines of glacial white. His eyes, Steve thought, looked tremendously old.

He greeted Steve with a warm handclasp. Carroll received a gentle hug and a kiss on the cheek. Ginger got a warm smile and a hello. The four of them sat down, and the fountain man came over. "Chocolate all around?" Paul said.

"Vanilla shake," said Ginger.

Steve sensed a tension at the table that seemed to go beyond dissolved marriages and terminated affairs. He wasn't sure what to say after all the years, but Paul saved him the trouble. Smiling and soft-spoken, Paul gently interrogated him.

So what have you been doing with yourself?

Really?

How did that work out?

That's too bad; then what?

What about afterward?

And you came back?

How about since?

What do you do now?

Paul sat back in the scrolled-wire ice-cream parlor chair, still smiling, playing with the plastic straw. He tied knots in the straw and then untied them.

"Do you know," said Paul, "that this whole complicated reunion of the four of us is not a matter of chance?"

Steve studied the other man. Paul's smile faded to impassivity. "I'm not that paranoid," Steve said. "It didn't occur to me."

"It's a setup."

Steve considered that silently.

"It didn't take place until after I had tossed the yarrow stalks a considerable number of times," said Paul. His voice was wry. "I don't know what the official company policy on such irrational behavior is, but it all seemed right under extraordinary circumstances. I told Carroll where she could likely find you and left the means of contact up to her."

The two women waited and watched silently. Carroll's expression was, Steve thought, one of concern. Ginger looked apprehensive. "So what is it?" he said. "What kind of game am I in?"

"It's no game," said Carroll quickly. "We need you."

"You know what I thought ever since I met you in Miss Gorman's class?" said Paul. "You're not a loser. You've just needed some—direction."

Steve said impatiently, "Come on."

"It's true." Paul set down the straw. "Why we need you is because you seem to see things most others can't see."



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*Time's predator hunts.*

*Years scatter before her like a school of minnows surprised. The rush of her passage causes eons to eddy. Wind sweeps down the canyon with the roar of combers breaking on the sand. The moon, full and newly risen, exerts its tidal force.*

*Moonlight flashes on the slash of teeth.*

*She drives for the surface not out of rational decision. All blunt power embodied in smooth motion, she simply is what she is.*

Steve sat without speaking. Finally he said vaguely, "Things."

"That's right. You see things. It's an ability."

"I don't know...."

"We think *we* do. We all remember that night after prom. And there were other times, back in school. None of us has seen you since we all played scatter-geese, but I've had the resources, through the corporation, to do some checking. The issue didn't come up until recently. In the last month, I've read your school records, your psychiatric history."

"That must have taken some trouble," said Steve. "Should I feel flattered?"

"Tell him," said Ginger. "Tell him what this is all about."

"Yeah," said Steve. "Tell me."

For the first time in the conversation, Paul hesitated. "Okay," he finally said. "We're hunting a ghost in the Wind River."

"Say again?"

"That's perhaps poor terminology." Paul looked uncomfortable. "But what we're looking for is a presence, some sort of extranatural phenomenon."

"'Ghost' is a perfectly good word," said Carroll.

"Better start from the beginning," said Steve.

When Paul didn't answer immediately, Carroll said, "I know you don't read the papers. Ever listen to the radio?"

Steve shook his head. "Not much."

"About a month ago, an Enerco mineral-survey party in the Wind Rivers got the living daylights scared out of them."

"Leave out what they saw," said Paul. "I'd like to include a control factor."

"It wasn't just the Enerco people. Others have seen it, both Indians and Anglos. The consistency of the witnesses has been remarkable. If you haven't heard about this at the bars, Steve, you must have been asleep."

"I haven't been all that social for a while," said Steve. "I did hear that someone's trying to scare the oil and coal people off the reservation."

"Not someone," said Paul. "Some *thing*. I'm convinced of that now."

"A ghost," said Steve.

"A presence."

"There're rumors," said Carroll, "that the tribes have revived the Ghost Dance—"



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"Just a few extremists," said Paul.

"—to conjure back an avenger from the past who will drive every white out of the county."

Steve knew of the Ghost Dance, had read of the Paiute mystic Wovoka who, in 1888, had claimed that in a vision the spirits had promised the return of the buffalo and the restoration to the Indians of their ancestral lands. The Plains tribes had danced assiduously the Ghost Dance to ensure this. Then in 1908 the U.S. government suppressed the final Sioux uprising and, except for a few scattered incidents, that was that. Discredited, Wovoka survived to die in the midst of the Great Depression.

"I have it on good authority," said Paul, "that the Ghost Dance was revived *after* the presence terrified the survey crew."

"That really doesn't matter," Carroll said. "Remember prom night? I've checked the newspaper morgues in Fremont and Lander and Riverton. There've been strange sightings for more than a century."

"That was then," said Paul. "The problem now is that the tribes are infinitely more restive, and my people are actually getting frightened to go out into the field." His voice took on a bemused tone. "Arab terrorists couldn't do it, civil wars didn't bother them, but a damned ghost is scaring the wits out of them—literally."

"Too bad," said Ginger. She did not sound regretful.

Steve looked at the three gathered around the table. He knew he did not understand all the details and nuances of the love and hate and trust and broken affections. "I can understand Paul's concern," he said. "But why the rest of you?"

The women exchanged glances. "One way or another," said Carroll, "we're all tied together. I think it includes you, Steve."

"Maybe," said Ginger soberly. "Maybe not. She's an artist. I'm a journalist. We've all got our reasons for wanting to know more about what's up there."

"In the past few years," said Carroll, "I've caught a tremendous amount of Wyoming in my paintings. Now I want to capture this too."

Conversation languished. The soda-fountain man looked as though he were unsure whether to solicit a new round of malteds.

"What now?" Steve said.

"If you'll agree," said Paul, "we're going to go back up into the Wind Rivers to search."

"So what am I? Some sort of damned occult Geiger counter?"

Ginger said, "It's a nicer phrase than calling yourself bait."

"Jesus," Steve said. "That doesn't reassure me much." He looked from one to the next. "Control factor or not, give me some clue to what we're going to look for."

Everyone looked at Paul. Eventually he shrugged and said, "You know



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the Highway Department signs in the canyon? The geological time chart you travel when you're driving U.S. 20?"

Steve nodded.

"We're looking for a relic of the ancient, inland sea."

After the sun sank in blood in the west, they drove north and watched dusk unfold into the splendor of the night sky.

"I'll always marvel at that," said Paul. "Do you know, you can see three times as many stars in the sky here as you can from any city?"

"It scares the tourists sometimes," said Carroll.

Ginger said, "It won't after a few more of those coal-fired generating plants are built."

Paul chuckled humorlessly. "I thought they were preferable to your nemesis, the nukes."

Ginger was sitting with Steve in the back seat of the Enerco truck. Her words were controlled and even. "There are alternatives to both those."

"Try supplying power to the rest of the country with them before the next century," Paul said. He braked suddenly as a jackrabbit darted into the bright cones of light. The rabbit made it across the road.

"Nobody actually *needs* air conditioners," said Ginger.

"I won't argue that point," Paul said. "You'll just have to argue with the reality of all the people who think they do."

Ginger lapsed into silence. Carroll said, "I suppose you should be congratulated for the tribal council vote today. We heard about it on the news."

"It's not binding," said Paul. "When it finally goes through, we hope it will whittle the fifty-percent jobless rate on the reservation."

"It sure as hell won't!" Ginger burst out. "Higher mineral royalties mean more incentive not to have a career."

Paul laughed. "Are you blaming me for being the chicken, or the egg?"

No one answered him.

"I'm not a monster," he said.

"I don't think you are," said Steve.

"I know it puts me in a logical trap, but I think I'm doing the right thing."

"All right," said Ginger. "I won't take any easy shots. At least, I'll try."

From the back seat, Steve looked around his uneasy allies and hoped to hell that someone had brought aspirin. Carroll had aspirin in her handbag, and Steve washed it down with beer from Paul's cooler.

GRANITE
PRE-CAMBRIAN
600+ MILLION YEARS

The moon had risen by now, a full, icy disk. The highway curved around a formation that looked like a vast, layered birthday cake. Cedar provided spectral candles.

"I've never believed in ghosts," said Steve. He caught the flicker of Paul's



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eyes in the rearview mirror and knew the geologist was looking at him.

"There are ghosts," said Paul, "and there are ghosts. In spectroscopy, ghosts are false readings. In television, ghost images—"

"What about the kind that haunt houses?"

"In television," Paul continued, "a ghost is a reflected electronic image arriving at the antenna some interval after the desired wave."

"And are they into groans and chains?"

"Some people are better antennas than others, Steve."

Steve fell silent.

"There is a theory," said Paul, "that molecular structures, no matter how altered by process, still retain some sort of 'memory' of their original form."

"Ghosts."

"If you like." He stared ahead at the highway and said, as if musing, "When an ancient organism becomes fossilized, even the DNA patterns that determine its structure are preserved in the stone."

GALLATIN FORMATION
CAMBRIAN
500-600 MILLION YEARS

Paul shifted into a lower gear as the half-ton began to climb one of the long, gradual grades. Streaming black smoke and bellowing like a great saurian lumbering into extinction, an eighteen-wheel semi with oil field gear on its back passed them, forcing Paul part of the way onto the right shoulder. Trailing a dopplered call from its airhorn, the rig disappeared into the first of three short highway tunnels quarried out of the rock.

"One of yours?" said Ginger.

"Nope."

"Maybe he'll crash and burn."

"I'm sure he's just trying to make a living," said Paul mildly.

"Raping the land's a living?" said Ginger. "Cannibalizing the past is a living?"

"Shut up, Gin." Quietly, Carroll said, "Wyoming didn't do anything to your family, Paul. Whatever was done, people did it."

"The land gets into the people," said Paul.

"That isn't the only thing that defines them."

"This always has been a fruitless argument," said Paul. "It's a dead past."

"If the past is dead," Steve said, "then why are we driving up this cocamamie canyon?"

AMSDEN FORMATION
PENNSYLVANIAN
270-310 MILLION YEARS

Boysen Reservoir spread to their left, rippled surface glittering in the moonlight. The road hugged the eastern edge. Once the crimson tail-lights of the oil field truck had disappeared



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in the distance, they encountered no other vehicle.

"Are we just going to drive up and down Twenty all night?" said Steve. "Who brought the plan?" He did not feel flippant, but he had to say something. He felt the burden of time.

"We'll go where the survey crew saw the presence," Paul said. "It's just a few more miles."

"And then?"

"Then we walk. It should be at least as interesting as our hike prom night."

Steve sensed that a lot of things were almost said by each of them at that point.

I didn't know then....

Nor do I know for sure yet.

I'm seeking....

What?

Time's flowed. I want to know where now, finally, to direct it.

"Who would have thought...." said Ginger.

Whatever was thought, nothing more was said.

The headlights picked out the reflective green-and-white Highway department sign. "We're there," said Paul. "Somewhere on the right, there ought to be a dirt access road."

SHARKTOOTH FORMATION
CRETACEOUS
100 MILLION YEARS

"Are we going to use a net?" said Steve. "Tranquilizer darts? What?"

"I don't think we can catch a ghost in a net," said Carroll. "You catch a ghost in your soul."

A small smile curved Paul's lips. "Think of this as the Old West. We're only a scouting party. Once we observe whatever's up here, we'll figure out how to get rid of it."

"That won't be possible," said Carroll.

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know," she said. "I just feel it."

"Woman's intuition?" He said it lightly.

"My intuition."

"Anything's possible," said Paul.

"If we really thought you could destroy it," said Ginger, "I doubt either of us would be up here with you."

Paul had stopped the truck to lock the front hubs into four-wheel drive. Now the vehicle clanked and lurched over rocks and across potholes eroded by the spring rain. The road twisted tortuously around series of barely graded switchbacks. Already they had climbed hundreds of feet above the canyon floor. They could see no lights anywhere below.

"Very scenic," said Steve. If he had wanted to, he could have reached out the right passenger's side window and touched the porous rock. Pine branches whispered along the paint on the left side.

"Thanks to Native American Resources," said Ginger, "this is the sort of country that'll go."

"For Christ's sake," said Paul, final-



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ly sounding angry. "I'm *not* the anti-Christ."

"I know that." Ginger's voice softened. "I've loved you, remember? Probably I still do. Is there no way?"

The geologist didn't answer.

"Paul?"

"We're just about there," he said. The grade moderated and he shifted to a higher gear.

"Paul —" Steve wasn't sure whether he actually said the word or not. He closed his eyes and saw glowing fires, opened them again and wasn't sure what he saw. He felt the past, vast and primeval, rush over him like a tide. It filled his nose and mouth, his lungs, his brain. It —

"Oh my God!"

Someone screamed.

"Let go!"

The headlight beams twitched crazily as the truck skidded toward the edge of a sheer dark drop. Both Paul and Carroll wrestled for the wheel. For an instant, Steve wondered whether both of them or, indeed, either of them were trying to turn the truck back from the dark.

Then he saw the great, bulky, streamlined form coasting over the slope toward them. He had the impression of smooth power, immense and inexorable. The dead stare from flat black eyes, each one inches across, fixed them like insects in amber.

"Paul!" Steve heard his own voice. He heard the word echo and then it was swallowed up by the crashing waves. He felt unreasoning terror, but more than that, he felt — awe. What he beheld was juxtaposed on this western canyon, but yet it was not out of place. *Genius loci*, guardian, the words hissed like the surf.

It swam toward them, impossibly gliding on powerful gray-black fins.

Brakes screamed. A tire blew out like a gunshot.

Steve watched its jaws open in front of the windshield; the snout pulling up and back, the lower jaw thrusting forward. The maw could have taken in a heifer. The teeth glared white in reflected light, white with serrated, razor edges. Its teeth were as large as shovel blades.

"Paul!"

The Enerco truck fish-tailed a final time; then toppled sideways into the dark. It fell, caromed off something massive and unseen, and began to roll.

Steve had time for one thought. *Is it going to hurt?*

When the truck came to rest, it was upright. Steve groped toward the window and felt rough bark rather than glass. They were wedged against a pine.

The silence astonished him. That there was no fire astonished him. That he was alive — "Carroll?" he said. "Ginger? Paul" For a moment, no one spoke.

"I'm here," said Carroll, muffled, from the front of the truck. "Paul's on top of me. Or somebody is. I can't tell."



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"Oh God, I hurt," said Ginger from beside Steve. "My shoulder hurts."

"Can you move your arm?" said Steve.

"A little, but it hurts."

"Okay." Steve leaned forward across the front seat. He didn't feel anything like grating, broken bone-ends in himself. His fingers touched flesh. Some of it was sticky with fluid. Gently he pulled who he assumed was Paul from Carroll beneath. She moaned and struggled upright.

"There should be a flashlight in the glove box," he said.

The darkness was almost complete. Steve could see only vague shapes inside the truck. When Carroll switched on the flashlight, they realized the truck was buried in thick, resilient brush. Carroll and Ginger stared back at him. Ginger looked as if she might be in shock. Paul slumped on the front seat. The angle of his neck was all wrong.

His eyes opened and he tried to focus. Then he said something. They couldn't understand him. Paul tried again. They made out, "Goodnight, Irene." Then he said, "Do what you have." His eyes remained open, but all the life went out of them.

Steve and the women stared at one another as though they were accomplices. The moment crystallized and shattered. He braced himself as best he could and kicked with both feet at the rear door. The brush allowed the door to swing open one foot, then another. Carroll had her door open at almost the same time. It took another few minutes to get Ginger out. They left Paul in the truck.

They huddled on a naturally terraced ledge about halfway between the summit and the canyon floor. There was a roar and bright lights for a few minutes when a Burlington Northern freight came down the tracks on the other side of the river. It would have done no good to shout and wave their arms. So they didn't.

No one seemed to have broken any bones. Ginger's shoulder was apparently separated. Carroll had a nosebleed. Steve's head felt as though he'd been walloped with a two-by-four.

"It's not cold," he said. "If we have to, we can stay in the truck. No way we're going to get down at night. In the morning we can signal people on the road."

Ginger started to cry and they both held her. "I saw something," she said. "I couldn't tell—what was it?"

Steve hesitated. He had a hard time separating his dreams from Paul's theories. The two did not now seem mutually exclusive. He still heard the echoing thunder of ancient gulfs. "I'm guessing it's something that lived here a hundred million years ago," he finally said. "It lived in the inland sea and died here. The sea left, but it never did."

"A native...." Ginger said and trailed off. Steve touched her forehead; it felt feverish. "I finally saw," she said.



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"Now I'm a part of it." In a smaller voice, "Paul." Starting awake like a nightmare, "Paul?"

"He's—all right now," said Carroll, her even tone plainly forced.

"No, he's not," said Ginger. "He's not." She was silent for a time. "He's dead." Tears streamed down her face. "It won't stop the coal leases, will it?"

"Probably not."

"Politics," Ginger said wanly. "Politics and death. What the hell difference does any of it make now?"

No one answered her.

Steve turned toward the truck in the brush. He suddenly remembered from his childhood how he had hoped everyone he knew, everyone he loved, would live forever. He hadn't wanted change. He hadn't wanted to recognize time. He remembered the split-second image of Paul and Carroll struggling to control the wheel. "The land," he said, feeling the sorrow. "It doesn't forgive."

"That's not true." Carroll slowly shook her head. "The land just *is*. The land doesn't care."

"I care," said Steve.

Amazingly, Ginger started to go to sleep. They laid her down gently on the precipice, covered her with Steve's jacket, and cradled her head, stroking her hair. "Look," she said. "Look." As the moon illuminated the glowing sea.

Far below them, a fin broke the dark surface of the forest.

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*(from page 97)*

newest entry into confusion dismisses the first two books (and the Bakshi film) with Gandalf (in the voice of John Huston) intoning portentously that Frodo and Sam had had many brave adventures before entering Mordor, and goes on to cover (more or less) the siege of Gondor and the two hobbits' trek through Mordor.

There were a lot of low points here; in fact, this film probably takes the cake for low points of the three. There was the minstrel of Gondor (don't ask) warbling about "Frodo of the nine fingers and the ring of doom." And that chorus of Orcs singing like the Mounties in *Rose Marie*, "Where-there's a whip, there's a way." And the lack of elves — not an elf to be seen in this one. Well, half an elf — we meet Elrond. Who says, incidentally, when asked by Frodo if he can sail from the Grey Havens with him, "There's always room for a friend."

And the habit of Frodo and Sam, when faced by adversity, of breaking into a dreary little song which goes on about the fact that it's so easy not to try/Just let the world go drifting by. For that song alone, they should have titled the production *The Little Hobbit That Could*.

All this will mean little to non-Tolkien readers. But to those who are, you'll get an idea of the horrors you missed if you avoided this. Not to mention what I go through for this column.



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| | | 26 | F | 27 | O | 28 | Q | 29 | H | 30 | M | | | 31 | Y | 32 | N | 33 | D | | | 34 | M | | | 35 | Y | 36 | T |
| 37 | U | 38 | P | 39 | B | 40 | K | 41 | O | 42 | V | 43 | Q | 44 | W | | | 45 | T | 46 | O | 47 | W | 48 | P | 49 | K | 50 | F |
| 51 | V | 52 | J | 53 | Y | | | 54 | F | 55 | U | | | 56 | X | 57 | N | 58 | K | 59 | W | | | 60 | I | 61 | T | 62 | E |
| 63 | T | 64 | Y | | | 65 | H | 66 | G | 67 | A | 68 | N | 69 | B | 70 | I | | | 71 | H | 72 | L | 73 | S | 74 | I | 75 | Y |
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| 114 | N | 115 | R | 116 | F | 117 | T | 118 | Y | 119 | P | 120 | X | | | 121 | I | 122 | O | 123 | Q | 124 | E | 125 | H | 126 | X | 127 | D |
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# Acrostic Puzzle

## by Georgia F. Adams

This puzzle contains a quotation from a science fiction work. First, guess the clues and write the word in the numbered blanks beside the clues. Put these letters in the matching blocks in the puzzle. (The end of the line is not necessarily the end of a word. Words end with black squares.) If your clue words are correct, you will see words forming in the puzzle blocks. If you can guess some of these words, put the letters into the blanks for the clues, over the appropriate numbers. This will help to guess more words. The first letters of the correctly worked clues spell the name of the author and the title of the sf work from which the quotation is taken.

A. A big bouquet for him

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
100 167 216 232 161 99 67 157

B. French Nose

___ ___ ___
39 103 69

C. British Fist

___ ___ ___ ___ ___
207 113 21 88 149

D. "_____Hero"

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
168 127 160 13 33 145

E. Recent Nebula winner — last name and middle initial

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
104 111 80 22 124 133 90 62 169

F. Letter of commendation

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
116 9 101 26 50 23 54 84

G. Author of the Faded Sun series — last name and middle initial

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
205 188 4 66 112 183 151 141

H. She's superior

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
29 65 71 125 7 110

I. A 1953 story by H.B. Fyfe

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
225 233 74 191 121 128 166 203 197

___ ___
60 70

J. This author's recent novel is a gem

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
15 3 132 140 93 52 78 209

K. J wrote this one with Williamson

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
16 6 40 58 89 76 11 49 102

L. Tied. It's also a story by Dan Kelly

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
72 136 152 165 86 144 79 148 177 198



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M. *Author of Blood Games*

30 34 81 146 194 184

N. A Jack Vance Hugo winner (with The)

186 223 162 97 57 68 5 32 129 150

195 196 114

O. We've come back around to H.B. Fyfe — a 1960 novelette

27 46 109 10 107 122 185 208 218 224

41 230 158 171 138 210 94

P. Creator of the Horseclans— Last name and nickname (possibly)

38 201 159 48 119 226 206 181

Q. His glowing novella won a nebula

18 28 43 96 123

R. A very recent Disch

147 211 219 98 106 85 115 155 1 234

228 215 163

S. One kind of nymph

179 73 17 173 221

T. Haldeman has reason to believe it will always be around (with The)

45 108 36 182 176 139 117 82 63 61

U. "San Diego _____"

213 37 153 12 8 55 135 175 20 236

142 189

V. "_____Lankhmar"

51 42 91 190 137 14 95 24

W. Mr. Martin

25 200 214 59 170 212 47 44

X. A beauty by Bradley (with The)

19 222 126 83 130 178 199 105 87 56

192 202 120 235 156 227

Y. Two by Tolkien

35 172 204 64 31 2 187 118 229 217

(answer in Sept. issue)

154 143 92 53 180 75 131 193 134 164

174 231 220 77



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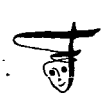

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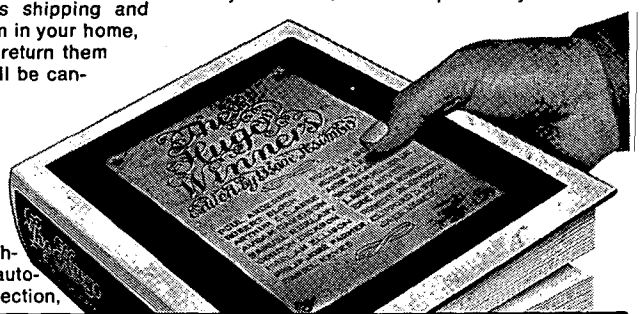


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